

“Not All Who Wander Are Lost” : A Sermon on Psalm 107: 1-9
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A few weekends ago I got lost. Not metaphorically lost, as in the idea of being lost in thought. Not some symbolic state of lacking understanding as in “you lost me,” or “it got lost in translation”. I mean I was lost—in the woods. Somewhere in a trail system in New Hampshire; really lost, as in I don’t know where I am, I have no idea where I am going, and I’m not even sure how I got here—that kind of lost. Sometime earlier that day, I happily wandered along a forest trail, hiking my way through the woods, enjoying the reflection of autumn leaf colors on a lake. But at some point I absent-mindedly took an unmarked trail only to end up out in the middle of nowhere with no clue about my location. 6 hours of walking later, I was still wandering. Just shy of the seventh hour, I finally emerged out of the woods and into a parking area holding one lone car. And on that car was a bumper sticker reading, wouldn’t you know it, like a message from heaven. “Not all those who wander are lost.” (Really—you can’t make this stuff up!)

You would be surprised at the percentage of surveyed adults who think that phrase, “Not all those who wander are lost,” comes from the bible and not from its actual source, the writings of JRR Tolkien!. Perhaps this confusion is understandable, given the many biblical texts featuring people who wander, only to be found, redeemed, reclaimed by a powerfully loving God. Wandering, it turns out, is an important motif in Christian theology and scripture. Moses led God’s people to wander in the desert for 40 years in search of the promised land! Prophetic voices spanning the centuries enjoin hospitality to strangers and sojourners, those who wander far from home, because one might be welcoming angels/messengers from God. In these and other biblical narratives wandering often leads to theophanies, dramatic encounters with God. And while some of these texts pose wandering as a divine punishment and consequence for the people’s sin, the narrative arc of such stories inevitably rests on the climactic moment when God redeems the people, lifting them from their distress or restoring them from exile. I want to hold together the tension that Christian theology maintains within this trope of wandering: it is both a form of spiritual pilgrimage to be embraced and even sought after; and a condition of harm and suffering for certain groups of people whose precarity and vulnerability force them to unchosen sojourns. It is a path toward home; and in its colonial appropriations, the wandering motif cloaked in theo-political claims of manifest destiny have been and still are used to justify the theft of the lands of indigenous people and their forced wanderings to accommodate the chosen wanderings of a privileged few. All of these meanings are in play in theological and biblical motifs of wandering for us to claim and to critique.

Our psalm text today is a song of thanksgiving for God’s work of gathering God’s redeemed people from the four corners of the earth. God heard the distress of their wandering in thirst and hunger. They were unable on their own to find their way to any inhabited space where people make homes. It is God who makes a way for them where there is no way; it is God who delivers them from their distress, leading them to a place of inhabitation. Texts like ours from Psalm 107 make one thing very clear: God loves God’s wandering people beyond all measure. God loves those who choose to wander. And, because God stands with the most vulnerable, God especially loves those who are

made to wander, who suffer the hardships of displacement from home and a dangerous journey seeking safety from violence, relief from famine, or escape from tyranny.

Hesed is the Hebrew word the psalmist uses to name this kind of love; there is no precise translation of the word, but it is often rendered “steadfast love,” as in our text; or sometimes “mercy” as in Ps 23 “surely goodness and *hesed* will follow me all the days of my life;” or sometimes “lovingkindness.” These various attempts to render an English meaning offer nuances of what sort of love God is: everlasting and eternal, faithful and loyal; forgiving and graciously self-offering even in the face of the people’s failures to live up to their callings as God’s people.

That’s a good thing, because amidst God’s call for us to welcome wanderers, we are seriously failing; we fail to follow this call when we exercise a preferential option for *citizens* over those forced to wander; a preferential option for people who already speak my language, or for those who can contribute to the economy. God’s preferential option for wanderers--those rendered strangers and aliens by human-constructed borders-- is evident throughout scripture and summed up in Leviticus 19: “The strangers who sojourn with you shall be to you as the natives among you, and you shall love them as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Leviticus 19:33-34).”

The UN refugee agency asserts that the number of people fleeing wars, violence, persecution, and human rights violations rose last year to nearly 82.4 million people, slightly over half of whom are internally displaced people, refugees within their own national borders (<https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>). The depth of human suffering cannot be measured in such numbers but they do suggest something about its scale. Vast numbers of people are forced wanderers, propelled by horrendous conditions in their homelands to wander across borders to horrendous conditions of a different kind in a land where as immigrants they are “other.”

The Christian story rests on the central affirmation that God is an immigrant. In Christ, the *Deus verbum*-- the incarnate word of God-- God crosses the borders that divide human fleshly, bodily existence from God’s being as one who is eternal and transcends the finite conditions of this enfleshed life. God migrates this border in the incarnation, with chapter 1 of John’s gospel offering a rich narrative of migration: in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. The Christian story is the story of *Deus Migrator*, as Peter Phan (2016, 858) names this God, God the immigrant, and taking God’s border-crossing incarnation seriously means that faith cannot be realized by a people who refuse to love immigrants.

So, how is spending two or three or four years studying theology at YDS at all compatible with this vocational call to love and welcome those who have been rendered strangers and aliens by the colonialist logic of nation states with their borders forming insiders and outsiders, citizens and aliens? Shouldn’t we just drop all of this and get out there and do something?? Isn’t it fundamentally selfish, a sure sign of privilege, to step outside of the world’s spaces of suffering to read books and write papers and think about life? Well, friends, education is always a privilege; the question is how we who have such resources will use them to lift up others. That’s not a simple task; immigration, like other life and death situations facing the planet today, is a complex reality that demands to be met with equal complexity. Theological education at its heart is not about being handed a tool kit of solutions to “apply” onto world problems. Experiences like the crisis of migration are much too nuanced for one tool to fit its ever changing dimensions. In a consumer- capitalism’s world that

reduces education to amassing credit hours and possession of the end goal of the diploma, theological education stands in contrast to commodified education; it is a kind of “chosen wandering”; a pilgrimage in which the journey itself is the point, and not just the destination. Theological education provides opportunities to be formed in practices, intellect, and spiritual habits through which one can think and feel, analyze and love, strategize and care and seek justice with the heart of Jesus, through whom God the Immigrant dares to embody hope in a world of hopelessness—faithful people who can come alongside those forced to wander, and speak challenges to death dealing policies and ways of life that compel their unchosen wandering.

Without at all trivializing the vast differences between migration as radically unsettled, forced wandering under often extreme and traumatic conditions, and chosen times of wandering, I want to suggest that the biblical motif of wandering, like most good motifs and metaphors, holds multiple levels of meaning that are connected: even while we are called to love those who must migrate with tangible acts of welcome, we are also called to equip ourselves to love more deeply; to bear Christ into increasingly complex situations.

Jesus the immigrant took time away; he often wandered off to quiet places to re-connect with his mission of manifesting the inbreaking of the kin-dom in a suffering creation and people. Theological education can be this “equipping” kind of wandering, one that deepens our capacities to know and recognize the Holy in all things; to render more compassionate care to those who are broken and brokenhearted by displacement from their homes. The wandering of theological education equips learners to thoroughly critique the principalities and powers at work in the world’s suffering; to understand living human realities like border crossings in all their complexity through the lens of God’s dream for human flourishing. Here we can hone ways of speaking and acting with passion in the face of the realities of the non-human creation whose very existence is put at risk by human-engendered climate change. Theological education at its best engages all of us in the improbable, counter-cultural, prophetic task of learning to form community with those like us and those unlike us. We wander here for a while studying and learning in order to avoid putting Band-Aids on cancers, to steer away from tendencies to take simplistic approaches to complex forms of suffering. We wander here for a while, working hard to gain strength and resources for the journey ahead as well as the journey that is now.

Some of us in this ninth week of the semester may well feel that we are not only wandering but if not tired, are also lost! Into our situation, the psalmist sings good news: God the immigrant who wanders with God’s creation is listening and hears the cries of God’s people; God whose character and nature are defined by *hesed*-love, steadfast love, does not abandon us in times of distress, but satisfies thirst and fills the hungry with good things. In *hesed*, God makes space for us to wander but never to be lost. We are claimed by the love of this God who makes a way when we cannot find a way for ourselves. God’s people wander but are not lost, because God the immigrant, God the Incarnate border crosser, goes before and behind and alongside us on this journey. Amen.

Sources:

Phan, Peter C. 2016. “*Deus Migrator*—God the Migrant: Migration of Theology and Theology of Migration,” in *Theological Studies* 2016, Vol 77(4): 845-868.

UNHRC USA The UN Refugee Agency, "Figures at a Glance" <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>. Accessed 11/1/21.