

When the Kingdom Comes Near
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The biblical landscape of the Middle East is criss-crossed with journey lines. Our spiritual ancestors were nomads, and they understood travel as an activity on many levels. With each footstep, you might be moving from slavery to freedom, or back into slavery; you might be moving from famine to prosperity; you might be moving from sickness to healing; you might be moving from ignorance into insight. They seemed to understand the way we needed the bodily experience of traversing a landscape to access the inner journey: a sense of who we are in the world, and where we belong.

We inherit from our tradition a sort of rootlessness, a sort of restlessness. We belong to a place, but...we belong to the road. Around the year 130, about a century after the crucifixion, a piece of writing called the Letter to Diognetus describes a Christian's ambivalent relationship between our place of residence and our belonging to no one place. It says:

"For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners [or resident aliens]. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers."

I may be thinking of paths and journeys because I just returned from a hiking trip in northern England. And there are almost too many metaphors to count in the ways my daily activity seemed to point to deeper, non-recreational meanings. How much do I carry with me each day? Will I be prepared for the weather? What about the way that that crag looked absolutely insurmountable from below, and now, a half an hour later it is way below me, almost insignificant? And the conversations with other walkers: "Isn't there a path that goes down here to Grasmere? I know it's not on the map, but I heard it was here." There is the constant looking backward to see where I have been, looking forward to see the next goal, all the while being attentive to the small and grace-filled moments that bring us joy.

Our Scripture readings today give us two travel stories, and, as always, there is a lot more there than getting from point A to point B. The great general Naaman has a problem that can only be solved by going from Damascus to the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The victorious general, working for a victorious king, hears from a prize of war, a captured slave girl that his healing can be found in the defeated nation. And so he travels (probably not on foot) with all the pomp and wealth a victor can claim, as well as his credentials: a letter from the king. This is not the leper of so many Bible stories: the shamed outcast. Apparently, the rules change on quarantine if you are the king's

favorite general. But neither the letter nor the silver nor the gold does Naaman any good. He has made the journey, but his identity and mind set are still back in Damascus. Why didn't the prophet Elisha do the expected things: make a fuss, wave his hands, say the magic words? It takes the words of a servant, once again, to persuade Naaman to take one more small journey, the trip to the waters of the Jordan, and dip himself (the Greek Old Testament says "baptize himself") in the river. Even then, Naaman retains that sense of superiority: he wants to be generous and pay Elisha for the healing. He is rich, after all. I see this as the real turning point for our general. Instead of rewarding the prophet, he becomes the beggar. He asks for some earth from the land of the prophet and the Jordan to bring home with him. Some dirt: a physical reminder, perhaps, of humility and need.

This is a striking healing story because it challenges assumptions about power and wealth and need. What were Naaman's reflections as he journeyed back to Damascus? The world had shifted, his allegiances were more nuanced, his identity had changed. He had drawn closer to God's power...and maybe found himself a little more likely to listen to slaves and servants, a little less likely to throw those coffers of gold and silver around.

The travel story from the Gospel of Luke is also about crossing borders and the possibility of healing. A couple of details grab our attention. First, there are 70 followers of Jesus specially chosen for this journey. So the common image of 12 or so disciples is expanded to quite a large group. Next, these people are sent out in advance of Jesus, to places he had not been. They were preparing the way with three actions: greetings of peace, acts of healing, and a specific proclamation: "The kingdom of God has come near to you." He also commands that the travelers take nothing extra with them. These disciples will depend completely on the generosity of others – for their food, their lodging, anything they need. And, by the way, the "others" are also described as "wolves."

To return to my experience of long distance walks in England and Scotland: I really like knowing where I am going to sleep at night. I really like knowing that a hot meal will be there at the end of the day. I really do **not** like leaving such things to chance.

Jesus is telling his disciples to be deliberately uncomfortable and vulnerable as they travel. But wait: they do have one resource. They do not travel alone. They have a companion who is just as vulnerable, just as willing to speak words of peace in a new setting. Perhaps this is actually the way the Kingdom of God comes near, how it is demonstrated by living, breathing bodies. Two companions, strangers in a village, offering peace, offering a healing touch, offering hope, accepting food, accepting a bed, taking each day as it comes with courage and gratitude.

These Bible stories are very foreign to us. Ancient Damascus and ancient Israel; skin diseases healed by a swim in a river; Jesus sending out missionaries with no conversion agenda, just the power to heal and a cryptic statement. We cannot follow in those exact footsteps; we have to take an interpretive step here.

This is what I want to learn from the old stories: how to walk through each day in such a way that I can perceive all the moments that the Kingdom of God comes near. I want to learn how to divest myself of superfluous baggage: whether it is the pride of Naaman, or his assumptions about power and wealth. I want to be able to listen to the small voices that point out an opportunity I have refused to take. I want to find companions who will speak words of peace with me in new

places. I want to travel bravely away from comfort. Maybe when I have done these things, my eyes will be opened to the nearness of the Kingdom.

And yet, with or without these two stories, I have to say that I have seen and felt the Kingdom very, very near in this place, in our spiritual journey together. In the last year, something has been revealed about the character of this congregation in its care of the Gerke family – something that was already there, but it was made so plain, so that no one could doubt that the Kingdom of God had come very near. There have been times where our faith and our yearning were expressed so fully in music, with one voice or many, that I felt the Kingdom of God very near. And every time we welcome a small child into our gathering, with a touch of water that echoes a dipping in the Jordan, the joy we all feel brings us so close to the Kingdom of God.

We love this place, but we remember that we are sojourners here, and that our true home is a journey, a road, a path. We have been called, we have been sent. We have been reminded: do not travel alone, do travel light, do offer peace, share healing when you can. In the shelter of each other, and with the blessing of God, we live as citizens of the commonwealth of heaven, alive to the grace of each day. Amen