

Traveling Through the Wilderness

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Genesis 12:1-4a and Psalm 121

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“I lift up my eyes to the hills;
from where is my help to come?”

Abram must have asked this question when God told him to take his wife and his family and travel from Haran to Canaan. This was not the first trip Abram made. Many years before, his father Terah—again, with God’s instruction—packed up his family and left their home in Ur for Canaan. They only went as far as Haran, but they had traveled a long way, more than 500 miles through the wilderness. Abram’s trip to Hebron, where he and Sarai ultimately settled, was shorter, around 400 miles, but again, a long walk through the wilderness.

I try to imagine walking from Escanaba, my hometown, to Mt. Pleasant, some 310 miles. In summer heat, it seems an unendurable journey. And if the Mackinac Bridge isn’t part of the picture, the difficulties become greater. In winter, the idea is even more frightening. On foot, it could be deadly, though I know our ancestors survived the cold and the wind. But somehow a car doesn’t seem much of an improvement: I’ve driven to Escanaba in winter storms, when I could barely see the bridge as I crossed it, and so I don’t like making that trip in winter, when a storm can suddenly turn the picturesque landscape into a lethal wilderness.

But Abram packed up and trekked many hundreds of miles through the desert, believing God’s promise that God would make of him a great nation. He must have assumed that along with that promise came the assurance that he and his entourage would survive the trip, as indeed they did. This story of Abram’s journey always reminds me of another man of the same name, Abraham Fulton, my husband’s ancestor, who, with his wife, grown children, and their families, came to western Pennsylvania from Northern Ireland in 1772. They too launched out onto a wilderness, a vast ocean that could break up a wooden ship. If all went well, they might only suffer from seasickness or scurvy. I don’t doubt that Abraham and his family, staunch Presbyterians, trusted that God would travel with them, protecting them from sun, moon, wind, and waves.

A century earlier, my first ancestor in North America, an Irishman by the name of Roger Casey, traveled to what is now Nova Scotia. There he met and married Marie Francoise Poirier, a Frenchwoman who had emigrated with her family to the young colony of Acadie. I would guess that Roger and Marie, both Catholics, prayed once or twice on their journeys over the ocean, and perhaps when they embarked in the strange, mostly uninhabited land that was to be their home.

For our ancestors, as for Abram and Sarai, there was no going back to the homeland: the ocean and the desert were too vast a wilderness for them to travel again. Most of us have

not made the kinds of physical, life-changing journeys our ancestors experienced. Indeed, we can travel to the lands they came from without much difficulty. But we are all travelers, making a journey as bewildering and uncertain as any our ancestors undertook. We live on a planet that hurtles through space, while at the same time spinning on its axis. And we, in spite of our firm grip on the land that gravity gives us, are always in motion, passing through the minutes and hours of our brief lives. Like the men and women who prayed Psalm 121, and like Abram and Sarai, we are on a pilgrimage. In spite of the best theological thinking, we don't know for sure why God sends us on this pilgrimage, but here we are, traveling through this world until we make the leap into the next. Some days we feel as though we're on a merry-go-round, our heads spinning, unable to get off so that we can regain our balance. Some days we feel more in control, focused, content with the direction we're taking.

In the midst of it all, we pray. And, to my mind, no prayer is more comforting than Psalm 121, often used with the sick and at funerals. This Psalm was one of the Pilgrim Psalms, which sojourners used on their way to the temple in Jerusalem. Biblical scholars think it was a liturgical psalm, with the pilgrims asking a question and the leader providing the response. And so the pilgrims, about to embark on their perilous journey through a wilderness of fierce sun, robbers, and wild beasts, ask this question:

“I lift up my eyes to the hills;
from where is my help to come?”

And the leader responds:

“Your help comes from the Lord,
the maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot be moved,
and he who watches over you will not fall asleep.

Behold, he who keeps watch over Israel
shall neither slumber nor sleep;

The Lord himself watches over you;
the Lord is your shade at your right hand,

So that the sun shall not strike you by day,
nor the moon by night.

The Lord shall preserve you from all evil;
it is he who shall keep you safe.

The Lord shall watch over your going out and your coming
in,
from this time forth for evermore.”

Protection: that is what the psalmist assures us God provides. Protection from sunstroke, from moonstroke (which the ancients believed caused fever and epilepsy). Protection from snowstorms and tornadoes and ice, like we have today. Protection from every evil that the world can throw at us.

Of course, we know that evil happens anyway, in spite of this promise. We know that we are sometimes ill, we sometimes grieve, we die. But we also believe—we hope—that God gives us the strength we need to bear whatever may happen in our journey through this world. And when we have this belief, and this hope, we are much more likely to respond to calls from God to venture into new territory: as Abram did, as his father did, as so many of our Biblical and familial ancestors did.

At our noon study group this Lent we have been talking about Henri Nouwen, a man who answered God's call to change drastically the direction of his journey. Nouwen was a priest, a scholar, a writer, a theologian who taught university students. He was in every way an other-worldly man, the perfect "absent-minded professor" who, by his own admission, could do nothing practical. He was well-established in life: he was praised for his writing and his teaching, and those who admired him made sure that he had food, lodging, and the means to travel wherever he wanted to go. And yet he decided, some eight years before the end of his life, to veer off in a new direction, one that took him to a small community in Toronto, where he became pastor for the community and caregiver for its most disabled resident, a young man named Adam.

Nouwen was at first terrified by his own decision: "So I began with fear and trembling. I still remember those first days. Even with the support of other assistants, I was afraid walking into Adam's room and waking up this stranger. His heavy breathing and restless hand movements made me very self-conscious. I didn't know him. I didn't know what he expected of me. I didn't want to upset him. And in front of the others, I didn't want to make a fool of myself." He was appalled that he, the least capable of the staff, was asked to care for Adam, the weakest and most vulnerable among them. But he overcame his fear rather quickly, and he grew to love and to learn from Adam in ways that astonished him.

Not everyone understood his new direction. A friend from his old world, a professor of pastoral theology, came to visit Nouwen and wondered that he could "throw his life away" on this helpless man when more capable people in the world also needed help. His friend could not understand what Robert Frost expressed so clearly: Nouwen came to a place in his journey where "two roads diverged," and he "took the one less traveled by," and his choice "made all the difference." He took that road because God called him to that choice. And he was able to make that choice because God gave him the help he needed. Because he trusted that God would help him. It was not for Nouwen an easy change in direction: indeed, he agonized over it for years before he made the decision to leave his familiar world behind.

We are fortunate that he left many crumbs along the way in the form of his writings, teaching us not only about his journey, but about the possibilities for our pilgrimage

through this world. He gave us the language to think about God's love, God's presence, God's protection. In dealing with his own fears and uncertainties, he reminded us that we can always "lift our eyes to the hills," that in every wilderness of our lives, God is there to shield us from evil. This does not mean we will live on this earth forever, or that we won't suffer as we make our way through this world. But it does mean that we can walk forward with confidence that we are never alone, that God is at our side when we reach forks in the road, or when the road seems to crumble before our eyes. It does mean we can become a bit more like Abram and Sarai, like our intrepid ancestors, like Henri Nouwen. It does mean that we can live each day knowing that "the Lord shall watch over" our "going out and" our "coming in, from this time forth for evermore."