



“On the Journey: Traveling with God All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes”

Exodus 19:2-8

July 18, 2021

When I was a child—about the age of our older son Samuel—as the school year neared its conclusion, my mind would turn with anticipation to the very best parts of summer vacation. There were of course trips to see grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles in the slow-paced Amish farmland of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. There were basketball camps, 4-H clubs, and Camp Grier, the wonderful Presbyterian summer camp in Old Fort, North Carolina. And then there were the lazy summer mornings that stretched well into the afternoon, endless hours of free time to explore the woods surrounding our house, or hiding out in our never-quite-finished-always-under-construction clubhouse. But more than anything else in the summer as a child, I looked forward to Wednesday mornings and a weekly program at our church that we called, affectionately, F.I.T.S. The acronym stood for Fun in the Son, the final word being a clever pun linking Jesus to the hot summer weather. Get it? I’ll wait.

All my friends attended F.I.T.S., so it was a weekly opportunity to check in, make plans for overnight stays and visits to each other’s houses, and enjoy competitive games of jump the creek, freeze tag, and water balloon toss. It didn’t even bother me that the program was at church or that it happened to be led by our pastor, my father, or that those fun and games were always preceded by a time of devotion and study and Scripture memorization. The curriculum for the summer centered on a child-friendly adaptation of John Bunyan’s classic 17th Century novel *The Pilgrim’s Progress*.ⁱ The book is an allegory of the Christian life, in which the main character, whose name is, conveniently, Christian, travels from the City of Destruction (that’s Bunyan’s term for this world) to the Celestial City (the world to come). Along the way, Christian encounters a host of colorful characters with wonderful names like Obstinate and Pliable, as well as his trusty companions Faithful and Hopeful. The

story was accompanied by a video with still photos of illustrations, but it was the story itself that gripped us. It helped us to think of the Christian faith as a journey or, better yet, as an adventure. It linked our journey with God to our adventures in the forests, creeks, and wooded trails, our explorations in the summer. And, in the three decades since those summer Wednesday mornings, I have tried and failed to find a better way to imagine our lives as followers of Jesus Christ, who is always on the move. There’s a wonderful scene in the Gospel of John where some would-be disciples are following behind Jesus, and he turns around and asks them what they are looking for. The disciples ask an interesting question. They say, “Jesus, where are you staying?” The answer is: Jesus stays nowhere. The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests. But the son of man, Jesus says, has nowhere to lay his head. Jesus is always on the move. Life is indeed a journey, and the Christian journey is, by design and lived experience, an adventure.

It would be many years before we would read the works of authors like Thomas Merton, St. Augustine, Fredrick Buechner, and Maya Angelou.ⁱⁱ But on those hot summer days following Christian, Hopeful, and Faithful along his winding path, we instinctively understood the title of Angelou’s autobiography, *All God’s Children Need Travelin’ Shoes*.ⁱⁱⁱ

We are God’s people on a journey—called to be always ready to go. I think that one of the keys to living into this image is resisting the compulsion to control the route or to be myopically focused on the destination itself. Since our grumbling faith ancestors in the wilderness of Sinai turned to God with complaint after complaint, we too can be tempted to think of the journey itself as a burden or a temporary interruption. I know I am tempted to think of the journey as merely an obstacle to be overcome on the way to that Celestial City, that destination.

This may come as a surprise to you, but during our time together in seminary, both Sara and I were known as two of the more driven people on campus. You could even call us ambitious, and you might even say that we competed for an imaginary honor of “most-driven.” I eventually conceded that title. Occasionally, emerging from long hours in the library or literally running from class to meeting to work across the quad, we would encounter a wise colleague named Nancy. Nancy was a longtime schoolteacher and a mother who had come to seminary and to her sense of call to ordained ministry later in life. Nancy had lived a life. Sometimes Nancy would stop us in our tracks, pause for a moment, and calmly say, “Remember, Chris, it’s not the destination. It’s the journey.” I’ll confess to some eye-rolling in the moment. Now, I look back and realize how right Nancy was.

It’s not the destination. It’s the journey.

So it is with the life of faith. Like any great adventure, the journey itself is our best instructor in the art of living well. It takes us beyond ourselves, and as we travel beyond our limited perception, beyond our obsession with control, we learn so much about ourselves and our world. I think of Mark Twain’s wonderful observation in *The Innocents Abroad (also cleverly titled The New Pilgrim’s Progress)*; Twain wrote, “Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.”^{iv} This is why we travel, and it is how the journey of faith can transform our lives as well.

At the end of June, a member of this congregation was awarded our state’s highest honor: the Sagem Award, which is given to Hoosiers who have lived lives of excellence and moral virtue that bring credit to the state of Indiana. Jim Morris has embodied each of these characteristics in remarkable ways, and his journey of life is a testament to the faith that has shaped him from a young age to this very moment. At the ceremony honoring Jim, Dr. Bill Enright spoke of how Jim has modeled what it means to belong to a story, a story that is bigger than ourselves—and how this sense of belonging broadens our mind and deepens our commitment to serve others. When we no longer believe that we are walking through this world all by ourselves and for ourselves, we can transform our living. It struck me that this can

and should be true for all people of Christian faith, for all people who follow a Savior who never stops moving, never stops journeying. That’s the story we belong to. We belong to the story of God’s love for the world—a story broader than the measure of our minds. It’s a story that, if we allow it, will take us on a great adventure, a journey through time and space toward deeper meaning and more fulfilling service. Imagine how transformative it is to consider that you are part of God’s story.

Frederick Buechner has written that all theology is autobiography. This definition may not work for some, but it has always made sense to me. It reminds me of John Calvin, who opened his magnum opus, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, with this sentence, “Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid Wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves.”^v If this is true, beloved, then we are here to learn to listen in our own lives for the sound of the sacred. Perhaps this is the most important journey we will ever take this side of eternity—the journey toward recognizing God’s voice.

The books we call Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are really one long travel narrative that describes the journey of God’s people from captivity and slavery in Pharaoh’s brickyards to the wanderings in the wilderness for forty long years. It is a journey filled with doubt and frustration. It’s a journey that strains to the breaking point the covenant between God and the chosen people. More than once, the people wish they’d stayed behind in Egypt. They paint idyllic pictures of captivity that leave out the wounds suffered, the freedom denied. And yet, throughout their winding journey, even when the people long for those brickyards, they are promised the sustaining presence of the Spirit of God. God never falters. God never leaves them. God’s presence comes in manna falling from heaven and water flowing from rocks. It is represented by cloudy pillar and burning fire. God accompanies the chosen people on their journey from Egypt to Canaan, and on that journey, they learn the greatest truth and sturdiest promise imaginable: that they are God’s people, that they belong to God.

That’s the promise we, too, can learn on this journey of faith. That we, too, are God’s people, always accompanied by the divine presence. The journey will not be without detour, interruption, or difficulty. But we will never journey alone. Never alone.

On this walk of faith, I have discovered that I need the beauty of God's world, the presence of Christian community, and the practice of prayer just as much as I need air to breathe and water to drink. I have discovered that I need a community of faith, prayer, support, and worship, because I will never make it all on my own. I have discovered that I need meaningful work and intentional rest. I have discovered that God is not yet finished with this broken, holy creation, and that God calls us to join in the work of renewal and vitality in ways large and small. I have learned that I, and all God's children, need traveling shoes.

In the summer of 2006, just nine weeks into our dating relationship, Sara and I took a road trip together from Atlanta to Tucson, Arizona, a drive of 1,700 miles. We decided that if our relationship could survive those five days in the car, we could get through anything together. So we loaded the car with tents and supplies and left before sunrise on a Monday morning. That first day we drove fourteen hours to Fort Worth, Texas. We were on the move, on the go. The second day took us to Carlsbad, New Mexico. We were driven. We were ambitious. We wanted to make it to Tucson, but on day three we moved slowly through the hot desert. We were tired and frustrated, and by dinnertime we were somewhere in western New Mexico or maybe eastern Arizona. The truth is we had not seen a town for a long time, and so we began to lookout for a place to camp, or eat, or both. Finally, we drove by a general store, part hardware, a few groceries, live bait and bullets. When we walked into that tiny store and the screen door slammed behind us, four sets of eyes turned our way. We were still squinting from the bright desert sun when the man behind the counter spoke up. The first thing he said to us was, "Are you lost?"

"Well, yes and no," I lied. "We are looking for a campground near here." The man looked at his friends, and the four of them all chuckled. Then he explained that there was nothing like a campground we might have in mind, but he continued, "I guess you could camp in the wilderness area. It's about forty miles from here, but..." And then he looked out the window at our 1995 Toyota

Camry and said, "The road is a little rough and it's easy to get lost out there." Two hours later, just as it was getting dark, Sara and I arrived in the wilderness. Ours was the only car we had seen since the general store. The night was dark and quiet in an eerie kind of way. As we set up our tents, we couldn't say exactly where we were. Very early the next morning, I stepped out of my tent and looked around. As my eyes adjusted, they took in a vision so beautiful it stole my breath. All around us were burnt orange cliffs, and the sun had just risen over those cliffs. The sky was impossibly blue. The air was cool and dry. The wonder of it all overtook me. I felt somehow much smaller and more fully alive than I had been in a long time. It occurred to me that the man in the general store was right. The wilderness can be a frightening place to get lost, but it is also a magnificent place to get found.

I expect the same will be true for all of us on this journey. I expect it will be true for our church as well. This week, a friend asked me an exhilarating and terrifying question: What if we believed that our best days are still ahead of us? When you journey with God, this can always be true if you lace up your traveling shoes and take the next step...and the next step...and the one after that.

Here is the promise: All along the way, there will be manna in the wilderness. There will be water in the desert. Whenever your strength is failing, there will be rest. And, when those shoes finally wear out, well, you heard right. You will be carried on the wings of eagles.

Oh, what a journey that will be! Amen.

ⁱ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress: From this World to That Which is to Come*, Amazon Digital Services, 2010.

ⁱⁱ Some examples include: Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*; St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets, The Sacred Journey, Now and Then, The Longing for Home*, and *The Eyes of the Heart*; Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Gather Together in My Name, The Heart of a Woman*, and *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes*, Vintage Press, 1991.

^{iv} Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad*, Signet Classics, 2007. p. 650.

^v John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Hendrickson Publishers, 2007. p. 4.