

“On the Way” with the Bible
(See Scripture passages below)

The theme chosen for the summer uses a common metaphor; It suggests that the Christian life is like walking on a long journey, being “on the way” to somewhere, perhaps on a pilgrimage, stopping only occasionally for coffee at the “One the Way Café”. I hope all of you have heard or read Peter Haresnape’s introductory sermon two weeks ago. He helped us think about our journeys suggesting several different ways in which our faith journey was pictured in the Bible.

To see our life as a journey is, of course, a metaphor or an image that helps us in our imaginative thinking, as we reflect on our personal and communal life as people of God. It is a kind of thinking that can bring our mind and our heart, our thinking and our feeling, together to the task of theological reflection.

Metaphors have an “is” and “is not” built into them! Life is like a journey but is also not like a journey. Sometimes it feels more like running in circles or standing at the edge of a precipice and looking down. Or maybe life is all roses or all thorns—to more radically change the metaphor!

Today I want to use the image or metaphor of being “on the way” in a slightly different way. (You will note that I may be expanding or stretching the metaphor or image beyond its capabilities, but I have found it helpful for me.) The scripture texts that were read are background material—you may want to ask yourself why I chose them, as you listen to these thoughts.

The overall metaphor that I want to use is this: the Bible is like a home that I continually return to as I travel on the path of life. This Bible is home to the church, a large messy family, some of whom I do not get along with easily. But this home and this, often dysfunctional, family are where I have found my identity-- through the stories of my spiritual ancestor. There I have learned some basic recipes (that I continually adapt) for how to live my life. This is also where I conversations and arguments take place that can lead me to wisdom as I travel to other homes and invite others to join me in my home.

The Bible is my home because within its pages I have met God, the God who has named me “beloved,” who has called me by name and who has invited me into a journey with Jesus. This

has given me healing, purpose and I hope some wisdom as I have moved through the various seasons in my life.

(So OK, the Bible is also not like a home---but stick with me for just a little while so that I can tell you how this image came to me and what it means to me now.)

The summer theme asks us as preachers to reflect on views from our faith journeys. This seems to call for a personal reflection on one's own journey. (Since I am a senior, this may be a long sermon!) So here goes for a much- abbreviated overview of being on the way with the Bible in one hand and my life experiences in the other.

I. Firstly: Some reflections on how the Bible became home to me.

Back in my college years Waldemar Janzen, a professor in Old Testament, suggested that there were two basic ways in which we could retrieve what the ancient Bible is saying for our day. Again, he used an image that has stuck with me. (But don't blame him for the way I am using the image!) He assumed that we need to travel to get to this home, as it is some distance from us both in time and in culture. The options open to us are to travel quickly by air or more slowly by train, car, bike or walking.

This image helped me through my first major crises with the Bible. Let me tell you about these two modes of travel and the way I have experienced them.

- a. Waldemar suggested that we can go back via airplane and assume that the distance between biblical times and our times can be crossed rather easily. We can assume that the biblical home has not changed over time and that we as a human community are still very similar to people in ancient times and so can cross the vast stretch of time and culture with ease. We can easily come home again and find that the family conversations continue with ease and with no complications created by the distance between us and that home.

For example, as a child my parents and teachers taught me this way, realizing that this was the best way within the richness of a child's imagination. Primarily I received the Bible through

stories of biblical heroes, and through comforting hymns such as “Gott is die Liebe.” God was everywhere present in our home growing up, in the daily prayers, in the books I read, in the orchards of peaches and cherries and thus in my imaginative view of the world. As I got older I learned specific Bible verses that confirmed a very particular view of God as being the Creator/Father in heaven, Jesus as a divine- yet human being--someone to follow in life, and the Spirit present in the particular church community of which I was a part. I assumed that when I read the Bible, it was speaking directly to me in my present situation. The people of my church were the companions who would always be there guiding me on the way, people whom I could trust, just as I trusted the God to whom I prayed when someone was sick or I felt lonely or I wanted sunshine for our SS picnic. I felt close to God in this home.

Even today, when we sing a familiar hymn with its biblical language, when I hear a biblical passage that I have memorized, or read a story that has had meaning for me, I easily cross the distance and immerse myself in the immediate sense of being at home. The Biblical language that I learned at the knees of my Mom and Dad and the congregation that nurtured me spiritually as a child and youth can still at times create a loving home for me.

- b. But Waldemar Janzen also suggested that we can cross that distance much more slowly, as if we are going by train or maybe even by car or bike or on foot. This can be a very different journey because we have time to explore the territory on the way, we can stop if we are reluctant to go on, we can see the obstacles that need to be crossed, we can also see the beauty on the way home, we may even find a series of new companions to accompany us. Sometimes, however, we journey so far away, that the way home seems impossible.

When going home this way we are much more aware of the long distance between the biblical home and the place in which we have found ourselves. The distance created by thousands of years between then and now, those many different cultures, those persons with different worldviews cannot so easily be crossed, without taking the time to understand both the biblical world and our world. When crossing this way, I am much more aware that there is a historical distance between me and the original writers, the original audience and the original editors. There is a need for maps and guides and interpreters to help me find my way home.

I became fully aware that I needed to go home this slower, more intentional way during my college years. This need was created for me through the life experiences that I was having when my childhood faith was not only tested but when it failed the test. I will only name one incident that created a major crisis for me.

While I was in CMBC my home church was in turmoil. There was a conflict between members of the congregation that threatened to tear them apart.

- They did not see eye to eye on what it means to live as a Christian re entertainment: movies, dancing, drinking alcohol
- They did not see eye to eye on worship: re whether to write out their prayers or to be spontaneous about them; style of sermons and type of spirituality
- They did not see eye to eye on what leadership meant and who should lead (power conflicts were probably the most obvious issues)

When I came home from college for a vacation, I went to a membership meeting where this boiled over and I saw how beloved church members criticized and humiliated each other, even calling each other cruel names and questioning the motives of those with different viewpoints.

My Dad, who was one of the lay preachers, was one of the people whom they treated with such contempt. My mother was hurting badly and feeling betrayed. I became completely disillusioned with the church; my experiences as a child all became suspect and I wondered if God was really present in this congregation.

I was experiencing this disillusionment with the church at the same time as I learned about the power conflicts that brought the Bible to us--The process of choosing which books would be part of the Bible--that long historical process that resulted in the Bible as I had known it. Divine inspiration seemed very hollow when I actually began to read some parts of the old Testament with its laws and regulations or when I read the wild imaginations of the book of Revelation.

I began to suspect that all I had been taught was just an illusion. If God was not in the Bible and not in the church, where was God?

I had to take another route to the home in which God could be found. Fortunately, CMBC at that time helped me find that route through its historical critical methodology of reading the Bible. I

began to recognize the human nature of the church and of the Bible. I learned Greek and learned of the complicated process of translation, I began to see how careful historical study was needed for me to see how this ancient book could become relevant to me again today.

The letter to the Corinthian church became very important to me as it depicted a congregation that had all the human traits of my home church and yet was called the body of Christ. I studied the background of Corinth, the sociological setting of the book and the kind of conflicts that that early church had. I began to identify with the story in a new way.

Slowly I recognized that I could feel at home among those early church members because I too had struggled with power issues, I too had felt restricted by beliefs that bound me--much as had the church in Corinth. The words of Paul became alive for me. I was freed to move beyond strict rules and the limited worldviews I had held. I could trust in the larger movement of God in this world. I began to seek the path of wisdom as I moved through life, knowing that the Jesus I followed had also needed to grow, to become strong and to be filled with wisdom as he reinterpreted the Jewish scriptures to the people of his day.

Those experiences during my college years helped me see that sometimes I do need to fly home via air to gain quick comfort in familiar surroundings. But more often I take the slower route home, I rediscover my basic identity as Christian as I meet new companions on the way, as I ponder over the relationship between the ancient and often ambiguous Scriptures and our life experience and as I enter more fully into the conversations about the picture of God we have each received within the different worlds we inhabit.

- II. A second major shift took place for me when I recognized how this book that I felt at home in, had become a place of abuse and oppression for many people who tried to enter it. I began to see the need for Biblical interpretation that was a new form of “home-making” for persons who had had the Bible used against them. When a home has functioned as a tool of oppression, Scripture has to be seen with new eyes. Listening both to new interpreters as well as to God can be very difficult work when some texts have become dysfunctional through their misuse. A new reliance on the Spirit of God is needed so that interpretation of the

Bible becomes a form of hospitality where all are invited to enter the house of Wisdom, all can come and share in the meal provided by God.

This second image came hard on the heels of feeling sidelined myself within the church and within the Bible. When I became a home-maker with small children, marginalized in the public sphere because I was a woman, I began to notice that male voices were also dominant within the Bible and within the interpreting community. I soon discovered that when I suggested out loud that the Bible was also touched by patriarchy, the dominating institutional voices took over to silence my hesitant critique. At the same time, I began to hear stories by women within our communities who were abused by church leaders. Slowly I began to recognize not only sexism but also racism, colonialism and violence within the home I had treasured. How did this fit with the ideal home that I had envisioned, where I had felt so at home for a while?

I began to find it difficult to say that the Bible was the Word of God when the Bible said that Adam was created first and Eve second because Eve had succumbed to the temptation of the snake. I began to rebel at the picture of the male god that I had been given by some people, a god who regulated every aspect of our lives as humans. I was very sure that the male Bible heroes were not the only ones that we needed as models!

I had to again make that long journey home by studying the cultures of the time of the Bible. I had to begin again to see the words on the pages of the Bible as words by humans who were themselves responding to the picture of God they could imagine within their cultural context.. I began to see that biblical interpretation, that is “home-making” for all, included all the conversations both ancient and present that could open me to seeing God’s word through the human words of the Bible.

It was during this time that I began to take seriously my own calling as a “home-maker”, that is a biblical interpreter, someone who not only came home to the Bible myself, but also someone who could help make the Bible and the church more hospitable and loving for others. Biblical interpretation and doing theology were a calling to become a wise home-maker—reinterpreting many scripture passages for our own day and listening again to God speaking to our experiences in our context. This required an openness to new conversations on the way, to asking new questions, to doubting interpretations that may have had meaning in the past, but were not speaking to persons I was meeting on the way.

The church and academy where I was studying became more uncomfortable for me at times because my conversation partners were often suspicious of me and my ideas. Sometimes it was like a squabbling family, all of us trying to convince the others of our view of the home we had grown up in. But that was not the worst of it; I could handle that having grown up in a family who very openly and loudly squabbled with each other.

What disturbed me most was that we began to disagree about who was welcome in this home. Our hospitality became limited and we began focussing only on ourselves as home-makers, each of us claiming to know the mind of God.

That is when I realized that I needed new companions on the way, people who came from different homes, people who travelled much further than I to come home to the Bible, people who could help open my eyes to see those folks who were longing for a home to go to.

My home-making began to focus on hospitality to all, including the stranger. I began to sit beside those who were abused, I began to interact with Muslims, with indigenous folk, with the LGBTQ community. I not only began to invite folks in but also to go out and meet them in their home. Joy returned to me as I became part of a home again that was focussed on mutual hospitality.

III. The third shift in my journey happened somewhat parallel to the second shift. It had to do with getting to know in more depth some of the diverse siblings that occupied the home. Maybe I can illustrate this by telling you about a recent experience with a sister-in-law.

On our recent trip to BC we stayed with Gary's younger brother and sister-in-law for about 6 days including the time we spent at the MC Canada gathering. We had never done this before, because the other two brothers also living in Abbotsford had usually been the ones to offer us hospitality. For various reasons this was not possible this time, so Allen and Elsyana took over and urged us to stay with them in their new retirement apartment.

Most of the time when I have met Elsyana, it has been in the company of the other siblings. Elsyana is Indonesian and I often found that I could not really understand what she was trying to say, both due to different accents and a different cultural understanding. This time we had an extended time to get to know each other. Our conversations gradually moved into those topics on

which we disagreed rather fundamentally. We were both ready to be honest with our own deepest convictions, grown out of our own experience of life and so our differences began to show up more clearly.

But because we had time to explore why we were in the place we were with our viewpoints, we found that we could also see our agreements more clearly. I learned to appreciate her Lutheran Batak upbringing and the spiritual strength that the more liturgical services in her home church, with choirs singing every Sunday, gave to her. I began to see how much her Indonesian cultural heritage influenced how she experienced life. I began to enjoy her singing as she went about her tasks, I could see how she was answering her own calling to be a “home-maker” in a different sphere than I. And I saw how much I needed some of her insights.

This has happened to me also with the Bible and with the interpreting community. I began to hear the diverse voices within Scripture such as the prophetic voices, or wisdom sayings or the poems of lamentation in a new way when I stayed with an individual text or individual book of the Bible for an extended time. I began to hear the marginal voices, the quiet voices beneath the dominant rhetoric of persons like Moses or Paul. I began to appreciate what Hagar, or the bent over woman had to contribute to our conversations in our post-modern world, something that the dominant voices could not see. I saw the disagreements among the many different voices within Scripture. But I could also see more clearly how the common home was held together by its worship of God, the primary home-maker, who kept all of these voices in conversation with each other and encouraged us to walk in the way of wisdom.

Conclusion:

My pilgrimage with the Bible has been long and is not yet finished.

I struggle anew to read this ancient book from the perspective gained by my new reality as a senior, with the limitations that this brings to me. I now more often take the airplane route home, to find the comfortable place in which to find strength and hope. But I want to continue to be part of the home-making that helps others feel at home. I want to be part of the conversation about God that the Bible begins for us and that hopefully will continue with all of you, my companions on the way. I know full well that the challenge for us in our fast-paced life is to find a time and

place in which we can take this slower more difficult route. And yet I am convinced that this is the route to a wisdom that we sorely need within this time and place in which we find ourselves.

Yet maybe in the final analysis the Bible is not so much a home in which we find our identity and where we are formed, but rather a doorway that allows us to enter into the home of God, the hospitable, wise Home-maker who welcomes us with open arms. She has set the table and calls out to us: “Come eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed. Lay aside immaturity and live and walk in the way of wisdom.” May we together become wise “home-makers”, wise interpreters of the Bible, who welcome all to enter into our conversations as we walk the way with Jesus. May the Spirit of God accompany us on this road. Amen