

A World of Travelers, Safely Home  
Matthew 2:13-23  
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Preached December 28, 2014 at San José, Costa Rica

This is one of my favorite books. It's called "A Book of Travellers' Tales" by the late, great English travel writer Eric Newby, and it is full of interesting and informative stories and accounts by travelers through the ages, arranged by continent. One of the many things I learned from this book when I first read it more than 20 years ago is something I so far have never had to employ, namely how to defend yourself from an aggressive dog while walking along. It turns out that you should offer your hat to the mongrel and when it takes a bite of your hat, and its mouth is otherwise occupied, you kick it under its jaw, it bites its tongue, and that solves the problem.

We all have something to contribute to this book. Some of us might not be quite so eloquent or descriptive in our submissions, but we've all got a tale to tell about some movement from Point A to Point B in our lives. Our lives are never static. Even the person who never leaves their hometown travels from birth to death, and that is not a journey for the fainthearted. Our journeys may include travel to exotic places, but there are also journeys of the mind and heart, of finding faith and purpose. Each of us encounters something new and challenging in these journeys: people or events or sights and sounds that move us to change and grow.

And I suspect in all these journeys, there are more than a few times that we wonder where we are headed and if we'll ever get home again, if we've really gotten in over our heads this time, and cooked our goose for good, as the old saying goes. I had that feeling once on the side of a mountain in Greece that was beginning to feel about four times larger than it actually was. That's because it was about noon on a very hot August day and my friend Mike and I were running very low on both water and energy. We had planned to hike to the top of Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain to the locals, the highest point on that peninsula in Greece where are found the oldest and most important monasteries in the Eastern Orthodox Christian tradition. If we hadn't realized it before, as we looked up and panted, we finally acknowledged that we had indeed overpacked, but at least we had a tent, and so we decided to abandon our attempt at the summit, set up the tent and wait out the heat, and hopefully, manage to make it somewhere to spend the night. Well, just as we were about to drag out the tent, we saw a vision of salvation on the side of the mountain. No, not Jesus, just two Albanians and their mules who, for a small token of our appreciation, if you know what I mean, hauled us up out of nowhere and deposited us at a small hermitage we didn't even know existed, and we spent an amazing night in a place we never could have found or even imagined. God only knows how they appeared at precisely the time and place we needed them, but those Albanians were heaven-sent in our hour of need. It was a profoundly spiritual experience.

That experience of travel in Greece, and all of its benefits, was, of course, by choice. We planned and pursued our adventure. But some movements from point A to point B aren't our own idea. Some people are in the military, others on assignment from their jobs, others visiting sick or dying relatives. The UN High Commission on Refugees estimates that there are currently more than ten million people who aren't where they want to be, displaced by all the human and environmental reasons you can think of, but mostly by war and famine. Our story tonight from Matthew features some refugees. Our own God and savior knew what it was like to be on the road, fearing life and liberty, dependent on others. And this story is only the continuation of how his life began, when Mary and Joseph were on their journey to Bethlehem for that census. I really liked the spin Chris Little put on the story in the kid's presentation last week. In case you missed it, the undocumented Nicaraguans, María and José, are welcomed into the La Carpio home of a woman they meet in the line at Migración, and there, little Jesús is born. Our Christian story begins with travelers and hospitality. No matter whose stable it was, someone opened its door to these sojourners and offered what they had, as little as it might have been. And they called it home for a night.

The Bible is filled with stories of people on the move. Adam and Eve, expelled from Paradise. Cain, forced to wander the earth after murdering his brother. Abraham, promised children and blessing and a land that God would show him once he got there. Jacob, on the run from his brother Esau. Joseph, sold to

itinerant merchants on their way to Egypt, and his brothers going back and forth in search of food during the famine. And we're only still in Genesis! Then there's the escape from Egypt and the forty years of wandering in the desert. There's the future King David on the run from the murderous Saul, the prophet Elijah fleeing the conniving King Ahab and Queen Jezebel. There's the exile to Babylon, and the return home to a ruined Jerusalem. Jesus wanders around Galilee and the Decapolis, before making his way to Jerusalem, and then he's off to the right hand of God. Paul goes on his missionary journeys, and his home for a while is a prison. And finally John receives a vision of the New Jerusalem, the home to which we are all headed, but we're not there yet. Everywhere you look, the Bible's got people on the move, for all kinds of reasons, just like us.

At the same time, the wayfarer's life isn't what God is ultimately calling us to. No, God seeks for us a home, some rootedness, some stability. That's what shalom is all about, what the promised land is all about, what the garden was all about. The New Jerusalem will be our final home, a return to what we lost in Eden, but God offers us glimpses of it along the way. For Jesus, maybe it was dinner at Mary and Martha's. For Paul and Silas, perhaps the jailer's home, after their escape from prison. For me, it's been people I've met in church who have taken me in when I needed a soft place to land. You've got your own stories too, I'm sure, of times when a door was opened and you entered into a place of peace and quiet or a meal or a listening ear. Home can be a temporary but powerful stop on the journey,

too, not just a sense of permanence. However we experience it, it's good news, because it is so easy to feel rootless, and unsettled, and wayward. But God calls us to that place to lay our weary heads and desires for us to arrive there safely.

I'm sharing this tonight because in the life of our church this year, we're exploring again the vision we feel God's calling us to. Every church has a vision of what God wants it to be doing in its community, even if not every church has discerned what that vision is. But we have, and we articulate it in the statement, "A World of Travelers, Safely Home," and we like to think it guides our hearts and our ministries. We've had a lot of new people come into our midst lately, so I thought it might be worth spending a little time on it this first Sunday after Christmas when we see Jesus, Mary, and Joseph departing for Egypt, weary travelers on an uncertain journey. They didn't know how long they'd be gone, or if anyone was following them, or what they'd find when they got there. But they had to go, and trust God to land them in the right spot. And no doubt, just like on their journey to Bethlehem, someone probably helped them get settled, and showed them around, and told them which merchants wouldn't use dishonest scales. They were expatriates, just like most of us, and that's not always the most secure feeling in the world, is it? But they made it there and home again, and you can bet they didn't do it all on their own. They had some help along the way.

That's our job, our calling. To help people on the move find their way safely home, whatever or wherever that home may be. We are in the business of offering

wanderers, or pilgrims, or sojourners, or fellow curious travelers, or whatever you want to call them, a place to stop for the night, or a season, or a lifetime or eternity. The place they are going may be a tangible space, or a spiritual place. It may be a decision or a process. It may be a new home or a return home. There are so many different ways to travel, and so many destinations. But everyone needs help along the way, and that is why we are here.

Our story tonight from Matthew does more than just provide a geographic transition from the manger in Bethlehem to Nazareth. No, its larger theological purpose is to show us that nothing can defeat God's purpose for Christ; that no political power, no violence, no treachery will stop God's bringing us home. The route from birth to death was not any straighter for Jesus than for any one of us. We all have a journey to take. And we all have God to thank for helping us get home safely. May God help us do our part in bring a world of travelers safely home. Amen.