



Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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“Wandering”

Deuteronomy 26:1-9

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Do you like to wander? I do. I like to wander in bookstores and libraries. I like to wander on beaches and in museums. I like to wander on foot my first time in a new city.

My mind wanders. All the time. I start thinking about one thing and then that gets me thinking about another and then another. I can end up in some strange places, making unusual connections. I once preached an Easter sermon comparing God to an octopus. I am certain that no one else has preached such a sermon because that insight is so original and, I'll just say it because I know you are thinking it, odd, that no one else in the history of Christendom has made that connection. I did so because I have a mind that wanders.

So this past week my mind was wandering and I started thinking about this topic of wandering and I thought perhaps someone else has preached a sermon about this. So I typed into my search engine the words “sermon wandering mind.” And do you know what came up? I didn't find sermons on the topic of wandering. No, I discovered confessions from lots of people about how their minds wander while listening to sermons. Totally makes sense. I'm just going to say it up front. In this sermon about wandering, I give your mind permission to wander. I'm good with that. Totally fine with that.

I do my best thinking when my mind is wandering. I discover new insights. I see an old problem in a new light. I connect things in unexpected ways. It is a good thing to wander.

In today's reading, Moses is giving the people a pep talk before heading into the Promised Land. They've been wandering in the desert for forty years and they are about to head to their new home, the place they have been searching for, longing for, heading to for such a very long time. At such a moment, one might think Moses would say something like, “The wandering is over. In the past. Behind you. No more wandering. You are finally home.”

But that's not what he says. He tells the people never to forget that they were once a wandering Aramean. An Aramean is someone who speaks Aramaic, an ancient language spoken in those parts. It's a reference to Jacob, who does quite a bit of wandering in his lifetime. “Wandering Aramean” refers to Jacob but the phrase is bigger than that. It captures the whole nation, the whole people.

Moses tells the people “Don't forget that you are wanderers at heart. Your central identity is not found in rootedness but rather in wandering. Don't forget to wander.”

Not everyone thinks that's good advice. The dictionary definition of wandering is “traveling aimlessly from place to place.” That doesn't sound so good, does it? And, then in the church world as a whole, I have to tell you that wandering is mostly seen as negative. Many Christian traditions see it as an enemy of faith. Don't wander from the truth. Don't wander from the path. Find the truth and stick to it. Find your home and never leave it.

More sermons can be found online at <https://subsplash.com/broadstreetpresbyterian/sermons>

And they have a point. We all long for some permanent sense of rootedness. We want our beliefs and our lives to be settled and stable. And every so often, we get to a point in our lives where we can say, “this is the way things are supposed to be and, by God, they are going to stay that way.” But things never stay that way for long. Kids grow up and leave home. Jobs come to an end. We move. Or we stay put and everything around us changes.

Things happen and life as we know it changes. There is this inherent insecurity in life that means that we are never fully settled, never fully rooted.

That has always been the story of the people of God. “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor...” That is how the people of Israel learn to recite their history. No matter how settled they feel in their homeland, they are invited to remember that they have been wanderers once and they will be wanderers again. The trick is to remember that their true destination is never Egypt or Jerusalem but God, always God.¹

And in the story of the people of God, things always seem to go wrong when they stop wandering. Think King David. Things go pretty well for him and for the people he leads until they all settle down and settle in. When the wandering stops, when there are no more giants to slay, kingdoms to conquer, journeys to make, David gets bored. And his boredom leads him down some dark paths that include assault and murder. Things go bad. Really bad. Things seem to go better when the people of God think of themselves as wanderers.

We Presbyterians are fortunate in all of this because we are a part of a wandering tradition. The unofficial motto of the Presbyterian Church is “Reformed and always being reformed.” It’s the idea that we never have everything figured out, there is always more to understand. That God has new things to teach us and show us. There is a holy restlessness at the heart of our tradition.

Last Sunday we confirmed nineteen seventh and eighth graders. It was a grand and glorious morning. One of the things that we tried to communicate to them in the confirmation process is that it’s OK not to have everything figured out. It’s easy to think that grown-ups know everything there is to know about God. So, raise your hand if you think you have it all figured out – locked down – no more questions about God, a life of faith, what it means to live a meaningful life. Anyone?

We are all wandering Arameans. We never fully arrive.

At the start of the confirmation process, we invited all of you to write down a message for the class on file cards. Many of you wrote about the importance of asking questions, of continuing to grow in faith. One of you wrote the following:

Kids, I want you to know that everyone in this congregation doesn’t “believe” the same thing, and that’s okay. We are a diverse group. I don’t believe the same things about Christianity that I did when I was your age, and I’m almost 80. But I’ve never stopped thinking of myself as a Christian. It is okay if you go to college and decide you now can’t believe in, let’s say, the virgin birth. I don’t either. Don’t drop the church because you can’t accept everything. Realize there are others in the pews who feel as you do.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, “None of Us Is Home Yet,” *The Preaching Life*, p. 158.

The message continues.

Most of us try to love our neighbor, welcome the stranger, seek and vote for justice for all, and forgive each other when we don't measure up. Those are principles Christ taught. If you can try to follow those you'll be busy enough. And we'll welcome you into our imperfect fellowship trying its best to be Christian.

We shared these words with the confirmation class at their last time together. We wanted them to remember that all of us are wandering Arameans. Never fully settled. Always restless. Always with more to learn. Until we draw our last breath.

That's why last Sunday Ann told the confirmands and their families, "Confirmation is not graduation." She asked them to repeat that sentence out loud because it's really important. Confirmation is the beginning of a journey, not its end. It's the beginning of a lifetime of wandering, searching, growing, learning, exploring.

All of this wandering and searching has a purpose. Our restlessness is rooted in our longing for God. We all want a place to feel safe, to belong, a place to be from and a place to go to.² But that place of safety and belonging is not a place at all. It is God. We are safe because God promises to never abandon us. That is the sense of belonging that we carry with us in our wandering.

This day, this week, this season of Lent, I invite you to wander. Because we don't have it all figured out. Because there is yet more to learn and discover. Because our true home, our only destination, is God.

Amen.

² IBID, p. 156.