

## “There and Back Again”

A Sermon Preached by Molly DeWitt

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### **Genesis 32: 22-32**

I think in every person's life there are significant places that have shaped and completely transformed one's faith. If you take a minute to think about the place you've encountered God or been transformed, what do they look like? Was it out in nature? Perhaps at a holy site somewhere? Was it in a particular church? Maybe the site where another person informed or influenced your life?

Strangely, or perhaps not at all strange, when I think of those significant, holy spaces in my life, not a single one of them has been in a church. Not every one of them has been Christian either. They've been places that I would name now as pilgrimage sites: Geneva Center, the summer camp I grew up at, the Buddhist Temple tucked away in a cave between the border of North and South Korea, a shaman site on an island off the coast of South Korea, my grandparent's backyard where I could escape alone in the woods, the highlands of Scotland. Unsurprisingly for my life, most of them have involved getting out in nature and experiencing God.

When most people think of a pilgrimage, they're probably thinking of a trip to Jerusalem or Mecca. Historically, pilgrimages have entailed journeys to sacred sites around the world. People go on pilgrimage for a variety of reasons: to come face to face with the history of the site, to get a glimpse of God, to learn something about themselves, to discern one's future, to make penance.

Throughout church history the Roman Catholic Church used to deem pilgrimage as a penitential requirement. People would travel long distances to the Holy Land, or if they couldn't make it there, to holy church sites throughout Europe. This practice began to get a little hairy when rich penitents started paying other people to take their pilgrimages for them, so the practice of pilgrimage fell away from our Reformed Protestant tradition.

It made a bit of a comeback in the 20th century for many Protestants. For some of us, it never left. There are holy sites that have called to people throughout the ages. There's something that draws us there that we cannot even explain. Whether it's Jerusalem, Iona, or for me, summer camp, when we find holy spaces, what the Celts would call "thin spaces," we feel a pull to be in the presence of God.

· All throughout Scripture we find places that are marked by the people of Israel for their significance. When we look at Jacob's story in Genesis, he has already encountered a number of holy sites by the time he comes to the Jabbok River to wrestle all night. He calls the spot Peniel, where he wrestled, to note that he had been at a place where he believed he had seen God face to face. This site then becomes a sacred place for the people of Israel.

I find Jacob's story all the more enriching as I think back on the holy sites I've visited in my life. Sure, they were beautiful, and I experienced the presence of God there, but more importantly I was often at those sites because of being at a crossroad in my own life.

Jacob sends his family on over to meet his brother Esau before he is actually ready to do so. He stays overnight on the other side of the river and wrestles a man. There is no explicit naming of this man, but Jacob assumes that it is God. Sometimes I wonder if Jacob was there that night wrestling with himself. We cannot know for sure.

What we do know is that he put a lot of pressure on himself before meeting Esau the next day. Earlier in his life he had tricked his own father into giving him Esau's family blessing. He may have internally wrestled that night with the guilt he held onto from betraying his brother. He undoubtedly wondered what would happen to him when they met. Would Esau kill him and destroy his household? Perhaps, he thought, he might deserve to lose everything.

We do the same thing right? We get away in order to wrestle with our most difficult inner thoughts and struggles. For me, growing up at camp was a safe haven to explore and question my faith. The Buddhist cave on top of the mountainside in Korea gave me space and clarity to begin processing everything I had learned while serving as a Young Adult Volunteer. Working in hospital chaplaincy with Debbie allowed me to peel back some inner faith and personal baggage that I hadn't been ready to deal with yet.

We're all on some sort of pilgrimage in our lives. Not all pilgrimages are so earth-shattering that they cause us to have our names changed like Jacob, but all pilgrimages have a way of staying with us.

I titled this sermon "There and Back Again," because when I think of the transformative power of a pilgrimage, I think of the character Bilbo from *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. Bilbo is a hobbit so completely set in his ways that he believes he'll never leave his home in the Shire. Yet, somehow Bilbo finds himself on a long, arduous trip to the Lonely Mountain with a wizard named Gandalf and 13 dwarves. At first he wants to change absolutely nothing about his life. He is content with doing the same things day after day and not bothering, or being bothered by anyone else.

Yet 14 people arrived on his doorstep and challenged him to go

on a journey, and if they all made it through safely, Bilbo would be able to come back to the Shire as a wealthy hobbit.

Bilbo finds a bit more than what he bargained for on his trip. He went on a grand mountaintop adventure, and when he came back he was absolutely restless. By the time we get to The Lord of the Rings trilogy, Bilbo is ready to leave his ordinary life in the Shire and return to the Lonely Mountain. He sets out on that journey as his nephew Frodo begins his own journey to Mordor.

Bilbo was never the same once he left his comfortable life. He was completely transformed by his experience. He was no longer content with the life he had been living. He felt a call to live differently. I think that is what any pilgrimage should do. If we return to our ordinary lives, unchanged, I wonder if we were really on a pilgrimage at all.

I think many of my campers get stuck when they come to camp. They have a mountaintop experience of personal transformation and return home as if they're coming down from a high. Ordinary life is hard to compare to the biggest journeys of our life.

So instead of comparing our life to the experience, or going out to seek another experience like it, maybe our true transformation is living our lives differently once we return.

That is my biggest hope for our youth. Not that camp is the pinnacle of their faith, but that it is the start to their journey. Places like Pyoca are often thought of as "mountaintops," but our goal is not for camp to be the end, but perhaps the beginning or the middle road. We are a pilgrimage spot that can offer a space of clarity to youth and adults alike, and while you are with us; I hope you are able to wrestle a bit. Our camp programs are not only a week-of fun, they are designed to challenge and provide the space to wrestle with one's faith. We hope our campers return home empowered to be people of faith, transformed to live their faith.

Take, for instance, this year's camp curriculum. It sounds very sweet, the theme is Peace Works, but don't let the title fool you. We're asking youth to wrestle a bit, because we know that being called to peacemaking is no easy task. The work of peace is difficult. It begins with ourselves, asking ourselves to wrestle with conflict that we participate in. It asks us to reflect upon the ways that we are unable to reconcile with others. It entails self-sacrificing and humility. It is more than just everyone getting along. It's actual work.

I believe it is work that many people are unwilling to do because it takes a level of self-awareness and humility to say "I have wronged you." Being a peacemaker means having the ability to address conflict, and that does not always look like immediate forgiveness.

The work of peace, like what Jacob sought with Esau, often means wrestling with ourselves in such a way that we are forever changed. It might seem like an odd leap, but the Israelite people went so far as to say that they would never eat from the hip socket because Jacob was struck there as he wrestled that night on the ford of the Jabbok.

Because of one man's encounter with God a dietary choice was made for an entire people. This may well seem like a strange connection, yet I think we should ask ourselves, have our encounters with God led us to make such drastic transformations within our own lives? Do we feel called to live differently as Jesus' disciples when we come face to face with God?

At the very least, that is a question I hope our youth will begin to face when they leave camp. It's the kind of wrestling I hope and pray for: that our kids know their voices matter in the church and world, and that God is calling them to help transform the world. We are not just a pinnacle mountaintop experience, we are a pilgrimage stop along the journey that is our life of faith.

These pilgrimage journeys we go on, like camp, sink far deeper into our souls than we may at first realize. Camp has stayed with me my entire life in such a way that I feel called to share it with youth and adults as an ordained ministry. Our youth leave camp different than when they came, and sure, maybe they're not changing their names, but hopefully they're asking themselves how they can better share the love of Jesus in the world as they embark on their journey home.

May we all seek to wrestle a bit on our journeys, whether we are on grand pilgrimages to holy sites or walking the pilgrimage of life, we are called to wrestle with ourselves and God. It is in these moments where we are truly transformed and begin to allow God in so that we too may be conduits of God's transformation of the world. Who could have ever known that a few hikes and deep conversations at summer camp would lead me here now? Where is God leading you?