

June 2: Displaced (*Hebrews 11:8-16*) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Good morning and welcome, fellow travelers on the way – I'm so glad we are sojourning here together this morning. Welcome to the kick-off of our summer series on displacement and finding home together. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and it can apply to matter or emotions or people. Displacement can be fleeting, like getting lost in a parking lot, or it can be permanent and life-altering, like being forced from your homeland with no hope of return. Displacement happens to all of us throughout our lives, and when we are displaced, whether physically or emotionally, we can feel adrift and rootless, helpless and insecure and lonely. We don't fully belong, we are not at home, and we're not in complete control. We might struggle with anxiety or fear, grief or hopelessness, anger or bitterness. Even when our displacement is voluntary, it often forces us to confront our own vulnerability and brokenness. As we walk through this series together the next few months, we will learn more about how to name these emotions in ourselves; process our experiences; seek God's loving presence and call in our own displacements; and stand in compassion and solidarity with displaced people around the world. Please join me in prayer before we jump in.

Loving God, you are our refuge and our shelter. Thank you that you are with us no matter where we are. We seek your presence now. Please help us listen to your voice together: awaken us, comfort us, challenge us, and lead us towards the homeland you are preparing for us. In Jesus' name, amen.

I want to begin with a question I've been asked many times throughout my life: "Where are you from?" How many of you have ever been asked that? How many of you find it easy to answer? Is there anyone who finds it difficult?

I'm one of those people who doesn't know where I'm from, who has to instantly decide whether to respond to that question with a short answer or a long explanation. Sometimes, I'll just say that I live near Seattle, but that's not where I'm from. I was born in Washington, D.C., but I've never lived there, so that doesn't fit, either. I got my first passport as a 10-month old, and by the time I was three, it needed extra pages. I spent my first birthday on a series of airplanes headed to Bangladesh, where we lived for seven years, followed by shorter stints in Illinois, Georgia, and North Carolina. My family moved to Kenya when I was 13, and were still living there when I graduated from high

school. I went to college near Chicago, and completed a formative six-month internship in rural Côte d'Ivoire. I then attended grad school in North Carolina, where I met my husband and got married. We had our first child in Pennsylvania, and our second two while we lived on the Hopi Indian Reservation in northeast Arizona. In 2009 we moved to Poulsbo, and we've managed to stay put there for 15 years and counting. So where am I from?

My background marks me as a TCK, or third culture kid – somebody who spent a significant part of their childhood growing up outside their passport country. I'm American, but America feels a little foreign to me, because I didn't grow up here, and I continue to miss cultural references and cues – but I certainly don't belong to any other country. I can very quickly adapt to a new location, but struggle to put down roots, and often feel out of place, even when I look like I fit in. I feel most comfortable in an in-between, temporary "third" culture of expatriates or students or people I am sojourning with. For many TCKs, including me, home is both everywhere and nowhere. During my vacation to Hawaii back in April, I caught myself telling my family, while we were out driving, that we would eat once we got back home – and by "home" I meant the hotel room where we were staying that week – I have no concept of home as a permanent, physical place. Sometimes, I feel homesick, but I don't know where I am homesick for.

Throughout my life, I have been deeply formed by displacement. It's helped make me who I am, and it continues to shape me. And in this, I am not alone. All of us have experienced displacement, and all of us long for home and a safe place to belong. As I talk about what displacement is and what it looks like, I invite you to begin to think about how you have been displaced or are displaced right now, and identify some of the emotions that come to the surface for you.

I am privileged because my parents chose to be displaced, to be foreigners and sojourners in Bangladesh and Kenya while holding all the rights of US citizens; they knew they could return here at any time and find welcome and security and housing. There are millions of people around the world, however, who are involuntarily displaced. At the end of 2023, over 68 million people had been forced to leave their homes because of conflict, and a further 7.7 million were homeless because of natural disasters. This kind of displacement, which is currently sharpest in the Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Gaza, comes with profound terror, trauma, and loss, especially when there is no safe place to gather or rest.

Our own country is formed out of displaced people and their descendants: immigrants who moved here for various reasons, both voluntary and because they couldn't remain in their homelands; enslaved people who were kidnapped and brought here; and native tribes who were forcibly displaced to make room for the immigrants who became colonizers. The US currently hosts the largest number of international migrants in the world: more than one in ten people here were born outside our borders, and we welcome tens of thousands of refugees each year. There's also a lot of internal migration within the US – nearly 8 million people moved across state lines in 2021 – and that's not counting the people who move around within the same state.

We don't have to physically move to be displaced, however. Even when we stay in the same spot, our community or circumstances can change around us, making us feel lost or adrift. We might lose a job or start a new one or retire; children might join our family or leave the nest; we might get married or divorced or experience the sickness or death of a spouse. Or maybe the places and rhythms and people that made us feel like we were at home are changing. Our community, or neighborhood, or church isn't like it used to be, and we feel like strangers in places we used to belong.

Sometimes, we are displaced because of a particular identity. One thing I've noticed as I've spent time with my husband and mother-in-law is when people ask them where they're from, they want to know their ethnic origin. They are part of the 40% of people in this country categorized as non-white, and they are displaced in a way that I am not in a society that has made whiteness the norm and standard. There are also people who feel displaced because there's a mismatch between who they are inside and how they are seen and treated in their community, or because their appearance or physical ability or neurodivergence makes them marginal. This is the second day of Pride month, and I want to acknowledge the many human beings around the world who still feel displaced because of their sexual or gender identities. Sometimes our own bodies make us feel displaced, when age or sickness prevents us from doing what we used to do, and we lose the capabilities and roles we once had in our families or communities. And finally, we can be displaced because our personal beliefs and practices cause us to be out of step with or even marginalized from our community.

Have any of you resonated with any of my examples of displacement? I believe that there are as many particular ways to be displaced as there are people on this earth, because displacement is a universal experience of

humanity. So it's not surprising that displacement and longing for home are central themes of the Bible, from the beginning – when the first man and woman were banished from the garden where they belonged, to the end – when a restored garden-city descends from heaven to earth, offering rest and home and newness and healing to all who accept the gift. As we explore these themes throughout the Scriptures this summer and identify our own displacements and longings, our hope is that we would each be able to know that we are seen and understood, affirmed and loved by a God who chose radical displacement in order to be with us where we are; to hear God's voice and call in our displacements and brokenness; to reach out in solidarity and active compassion to others who are displaced; and to find home together.

Our first scripture reading from our displacement series came from the book of Hebrews. Perhaps because of my own sojourning life, I find it to be one of the most evocative texts in the entire Bible. Hebrews is a long letter/sermon written to a first-century church. There's disagreement about who wrote it and which church it was written for, but clues in the letter suggest that it was addressed to a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians familiar with Judaism, most likely in the city of Rome. These Christians were not new to the faith – they'd developed some maturity as believers. But they weren't having an easy time – they were suffering intensifying opposition and social displacement, and were tempted to renounce their loyalty to Jesus as the Messiah and return to strict Judaism, which had official Roman recognition and offered them safety, security, and acceptability. Through their letter, the author of Hebrews emphasizes the ultimacy and superiority of Jesus over everything else, urging Jesus' followers to steadfast faith and endurance. Chapter 11, which we heard from this morning, is a magnificent passage that lifts up some of Judaism's well-known heroes and heroines as exemplars of embodied faith. And here's what strikes me about this "hall of fame" – there's a consistent focus on displacement.

From the very beginning of the Hebrew nation, when God called Abraham to leave his home and he obeyed, even though he didn't know where he was going, God's people have been called out to voluntary displacement. The great heroes of faith in Hebrews are not praised for entering the promised land and occupying it, but for making their home in the promised land like strangers in a foreign nation, living in tents. Listen to verses 9-10 again: "By faith, Abraham made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

There's a profound both/and here, a paradox, a story of people who were simultaneously homeless and dwelling in the promised land. Abraham and Sarah and their descendants were called out from their original homeland, their people, and their families. They were led, by God, to the "promised land" – but remained sojourners there: foreigners, strangers, and noncitizens; making their home in tents in the place of their inheritance and living in dependence and faith, while they continued to look forward to a solid, permanent home, designed and built by God. They welcomed this homeland from a distance, believing and living as if they belonged there, even as their present existence was nomadic and uncertain.

I grew up hearing stories of the Israelites that celebrated their faith-fueled conquest of the promised land, led by Joshua, where they displaced and defeated the Canaanites and eventually established a kingdom. But Joshua isn't mentioned in this Hall of Faith, nor is there anything about God's people permanently occupying physical land or building an earthly city. The heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 lived steadfastly and hopefully in displacement, confident that their longing for home would be fulfilled, seeing and welcoming God's promises from a distance, admitting that they were simultaneously foreigners and strangers on earth *and* citizens of a future homeland. In verses 13-16, the author of Hebrews makes it clear that the people listening to this letter are called to share the same kind of faith as these ancient men and women. The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, and it's formed from two roots which together mean "called out of". Like Abraham and Sarah, we as are called out of our usual and proper places into voluntary displacement; called to follow Jesus, our displaced God, into the unknown; called to make our home together in the promised land – not as occupiers claiming and defending our personal territory, but by pitching tents, leaning into our identity as both sojourners and heirs to God's promises, and living in alignment with the homeland of justice and peace and healing and belonging that we see in the distance.

It's hard to emulate this kind of faith, to embrace the displacement of sojourners, to live securely in God's promises now even though their full realization remains in the future. Our fear of displacement can be so acute that we're constantly tempted to stake our claim and defend our territory or our sense of belonging at the expense of others, rather than allowing our own displacements to lead us to solidarity with and compassion for fellow human beings. If we are the victims of repeated displacements, we might protect ourselves by becoming small, silencing our voice and burying our true self. We

struggle to live as a true pilgrim people who know who we are and where we belong, and can claim that identity and live out of that hope so that we wholeheartedly invite and welcome neighboring sojourners to take up space with us on the way.

What does it even look like to make our home as sojourners in the promised land, to hear and follow God's voice in our displacements? We can begin with listening and with honesty. Listen to your own life, and recognize where displacement has happened along your journey and how it is happening right now. **What are some of the feelings and reactions that come up when you think about your own displacements?**

The late priest Henri Nouwen and two other authors wrote a book on compassion and displacement that has been deeply impactful in my life. They said that as we recognize and name our personal displacements, we are invited to accept them as places where we can hear God's call, and that "in and through this recognition a conversion can take place, a conversion from involuntary displacement leading to resentment, bitterness, resignation, and apathy, to voluntary displacement that can become an expression of discipleship...It is through the recognition of our displacement and the willingness to hear in it the first whispers of God's voice that we start forming community and living compassionate lives." (p.71) **How is God affirming and comforting you, and how is God calling you in and through your displacement?** As we hear and follow Jesus' voice in the midst of our displacements, we can find agency and purpose, even in situations we can't control. It's not always easy to hear God's voice, but maybe we can start by listening to the passage we read today, and the stories we'll be reading over the summer. How is God calling to you through the passage from Hebrews?

We can also listen to each other and to the lives of the countless displaced people around us. Listen for the word "displacement" in the news, and take in the stories you hear. As we recognize the brokenness, loss, grief, and other emotions surrounding our own displacements, we can allow them to form compassion in us, and move us towards acts of solidarity with and advocacy for the many who live profoundly displaced lives in our communities and around the world. When we admit our identity as strangers and sojourners longing for home, we become more ready to notice, welcome, and make home for the strangers and sojourners in our midst.

We also need to listen to our own and each other's longing for home. We were made to belong, to feel safe and secure and known and accepted, to live fully in line with who we truly are; to find, as in the words of the author of Hebrews, a homeland of our own. **What does home look like for you?** What are the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, people, and surroundings that carry the essence of home? What would it look like for you to feel at home in this church? What can we do to make others at home here? Throughout this summer, I hope that all of us, from kids to adults, will cover this bulletin board with pictures or words or photographs that help to capture what home means to us. Everybody here, including kids, is also invited to sign up to attend a home group this summer and share stories about where we're from (even when it's complicated), how we've experienced displacement, and what home looks like for us. By listening and learning from each other in someone's home, we'll take one step closer to making home together in this community.

As I worked on the conclusion of this message, I really struggled to pull things together to end of a note of resolution, in the same way a musical piece ends on a satisfying resolved chord and doesn't leave you hanging. And then I realized that part of the reason I was struggling so much is because I'm going through my own season of displacements right now, and I'm not fully resolved. I need the questions and messages and promises we'll be exploring this summer. But one thing I do know is that in every season and displacement of my life, God has gone before me and come behind me and is with me, no matter what. I am safe and I am loved and I belong, and so do you. May you carry that promise with you as you listen to God's voice in your own displacements and longing for home. Amen.