

July 7th: Desert

Good morning again, traveling companions. We have begun a new journey together—our summer sermon series titled “Dis[place]d: Finding Home Together.” This series is meant to be a sojourn into the biblical story, and a tool to help each of us identify the displacement in our own lives, so that we might find comfort in God’s promise of a future home.

When Pastor Heather introduced this topic, she defined this concept of displacement for us, saying that to displace something is to remove it from its usual or proper place, and this can apply to both tangible things like individuals and intangible things like emotions. Displacement can be temporary or permanent, but often the same underlying feelings apply to this sense of disorientation and confusion. When in displacement, we might feel adrift or lost, or perhaps anxious and afraid, or maybe insecure or bitter. We might have lost sight of the people, places, or objects that make us feel safe and at home, so we feel a deep sense of vulnerability.

Last month, we focused on stories of involuntary displacement—examples from our biblical story where displacement and disorientation was outside of human control. This month, we’ll move into a new topic—stories of voluntary displacement, and what it looks like to willingly enter into these experiences of change and transition. So if you are with us this morning and identify with any of those feelings, or are going through an experience of displacement in your life, we invite you to enter into this time of meditation with an openness to God’s presence and the peace that is waiting for you in this place.

Let’s pray together before we begin.

Ever-Present God, you walk alongside us in all of our journeys, even the ones that are marked by difficulty and displacement. You walk with us as our most intimate traveling companion, even when we are on the wrong path or take a wrong turn. In these moments of vulnerability, remind us of your enduring love for us—love that transcends our human brokenness, and love that repairs the

fractured places of our hearts. Walk with us today and bring healing to our wounded and anxious souls. Amen.

Have you ever made a mistake so big that it changed the course of your life? Have you ever made a decision that ended up costing you more than you anticipated? Have you ever made a choice that seemed like a good idea at the time, but that you ended up regretting?

If you answered yes to any of those questions, I want you to know that you're in good company. Let me tell you about one of the mistakes that had a deep impact on my early life. For the first eight years of my life, my family lived in a smaller neighborhood that was a mix between houses and condo complexes—and it was a kids paradise. We had at least a dozen kids on just our street, and it was like being constantly surrounded by friends and extended family.

At some point, a young, newlywed couple moved in down the street from my house, a man named Jonathan, and a woman named Lisa. Jonathan and Lisa quickly became neighborhood favorites—playing with us kids as we wove up and down the street on our bikes, keeping extra chalk on their porch so we could decorate their driveway, and waving to us all when they went to get the mail. All was well until my neighbor, another little girl by the name of Jessica, decided that she had a new way to play—and her idea was to throw rocks instead of the baseballs that we typically used. I wasn't convinced, and I tried to talk her out of it, but she would not be swayed, so I decided to go with her to try and keep her out of too much trouble. At first, she threw small pebbles, then larger stones, until she was hurling much bigger rocks, all safely landing in the grass not far from where we were standing.

Jessica also started taunting me, telling me I was lame for refusing to play with her. She called me names, told me that she wasn't going to be my friend anymore, and said I was boring to hang out with. Well, I mentioned last week that the pressure to fit in can make us do plenty of weird or stupid things, and I fell right into that trap. In an attempt to seem less boring and lame, I picked

up a rock of my own, and I let it fly. I expected that nothing would happen—except I had started playing softball a few weeks before and apparently I could throw a little better than Jessica could. For a moment, everything was fine—until we heard the sickening sound of my rock crashing through the window of Jonathan and Lisa’s car. Glass shattered everywhere, and all it took was a few beats of silence for me to realize that I had messed up. Big time. Bigger than I had even messed up before.

In the hours that followed, I was inconsolable. I wanted to hide under my bed because I was convinced that the police were coming to take me away. I tried to run away into the woods behind my house, because the neighborhood boys told me that I would need to hide in order to escape them. I wailed to my parents: I can’t go to prison! I’m only seven!

Thankfully, Jonathan and Lisa were kinder than I deserved. They came to our house, gave me a hug, and told me that they understood that sometimes good kids do bad things. I did extra chores that summer in order to pay them back for the new car window, and when they moved out of the neighborhood a few years later, they promised that we would stay in touch. And we did for many years.

You might be thinking that this doesn’t seem like a big mistake, or at least a life-altering one, and you might be right. In the grand scheme of things, it was not a big deal to my family, or to Jonathan and Lisa, but to a child, it could be a formative experience—a core memory. I can still very clearly remember the emotions that were running through my head after such an experience. In particular, I can remember the intense shame that flooded my body, and how it settled deep into my bones.

According to wikipedia, shame is “an unpleasant self-conscious emotion often associated with negative self-evaluation; motivation to quit; and feelings of pain, exposure, distrust, powerlessness, and worthlessness.” As a verb, to shame can mean “to disgrace” or “to bring dishonor,” or “to humiliate,” all of which sound like experiences that most of us would rather avoid, right?

In her popular TED Talk, “Listening to Shame,” scholar and author Brene Brown talks about how our bodies and our souls are shaped by these big feelings—either when they happen to us as children, or when we experience them as adults. She says that shame and the vulnerability that it brings us is the reason behind many self-destructive or self-isolating behaviors, because when we make a mistake or when we do something we regret, our first instinct is to withdraw. Our first instinct is to remove ourselves, or distance ourselves. When we feel ashamed, that impulse to run or hide can be so strong—because shame doesn’t just make us feel bad, shame tells us that we are bad. Shame tries to tell us that we are irreparably broken. Shame tries to tell us that we are irredeemable, that no one will love us or care about us. Shame tries to tell us that our mistakes are bigger than anything else in our lives, and that our future is dictated solely by those moments of weakness.

And so shame can be a powerful source of displacement. I walked away from this TED Talk reminded that shame can be an experience that removes us from community, or cuts us off from relationships. Shame can be an emotion that drives us to isolate ourselves from others because we fear being judged for who we are or punished for a mistake that we have made. Shame can be the feeling that prevents us from being vulnerable with someone else, or prevents us from building connections, or limits our ability to work with others to bring about change.

Our scripture passage for this morning tells us about a man who knows what it is like to be displaced by shame.

As one of our most famous biblical characters, especially in the Old Testament, Moses’ story has many high points. We might remember pieces of his early life from the movie “Prince of Egypt,” where he is placed in a basket on the river by his mother and adopted by the Pharaoh’s daughter. In his later life, he’s known for rescuing the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, he’s known for leading God’s people into the wilderness and towards the Promised Land, and he’s known

for going up to the top of Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. But in between those moments, Moses is very human, just like all of us.

Our passage begins with a peek into the life of Moses as a young man—in a moment when he isn't at his best. Verse 11 and 12 record this: "One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. 12 Looking this way and that and seeing no one, he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand." Verses 13 and 14 continue: "The next day he went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. He asked the one in the wrong, 'Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?' 14 The man said, 'Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?' Then Moses was afraid and thought, 'What I did must have become known.'"

So, we have Moses, an Israelite brought up in the royal palace, who witnesses violence being done to his fellow Israelites as they work as slaves. When he responds to that violence with murder, he is confronted by his own people who reject him for this act. They don't praise him for what he has done, instead they are afraid of him and they push him away. His whole life, Moses must have felt torn between two worlds—the world of his enslaved people, and the world of his adoptive royal family. And when he is consumed by the guilt of what he has done, and the shame of being rejected by his own people, he makes a decision.

What does Moses do? He runs away into the desert—far away from his family, far away from his friends. He cuts himself off from his birth culture and the culture that he was raised in, and he voluntarily flees to a new place—the desert of Midian. The desert is a dry, inhospitable wilderness—a place of further separation and solitude. But curiously, Moses finds connection there in a way that he doesn't expect.

At the end of this passage, after Moses lived in the desert for many years and married a woman named Zipporah, we hear that she has given birth to a son, whom Moses named Gershom. In different versions of the original Hebrew

text, that name is sometimes translated as “a stranger there,” or “a sojourner there.” Moses confirms this feeling of displacement by saying, “I have become a foreigner in a foreign land.”

It's clear that Moses has not forgotten the shame and the disorientation that resulted from it. Moses' adult life has been shaped by this mistake and this impulse to withdraw—and now his son is marked by this experience as well, he will carry his father's experience of displacement within his own name. Shame and disorientation become written into their bloodline, it becomes part of the family story that will be told for generations to come.

As I thought about this passage this week, I wondered if the same might be true of us, and the mistakes we make, and the stories that we tell about ourselves.

The truth is that all of us have made mistakes in our lives. Not a single one of us is exempt. All of us, no matter our age, gender, profession, life experience, hometown, socioeconomic status, or personal preferences, have made bad decisions, or had a moment where we chose the wrong option, or have done something that we knew wasn't what was best for us. And the truth is that all of us will continue to make mistakes, because we are human. Some mistakes will be small, like getting the wrong ingredients for dinner when we go grocery shopping, or forgetting a friend's birthday, or dropping the ball on a project at work. And some mistakes in our future might be bigger—like breaking the trust of our spouse, or making a choice that hurts one of our children, or causing an accident that injures someone.

Most of us probably (hopefully?) won't engage in murder like Moses, but we might make a mistake that causes us to experience shame, we might make a choice that makes us feel like we want to run away and hide. We might have done something or will do something that prompts us to withdraw from a friendship, or break up with a romantic partner, or disconnect from a relative—but I want us to examine this impulse and prevent it from doing real damage to our souls and our lives. I want us to think about how that

displacement by shame doesn't have to be part of our story. It doesn't have to be part of your story, or your family's story. It doesn't have to be part of the story that you tell about yourself. You don't have to live in a desert of your own making.

Whatever those mistakes might look like for you—whatever came to mind when I asked those questions at the start of our time together—I want to encourage you with this: our God is a God of people who make mistakes, but our God is not a God of shame.

Let me repeat that: our God is a God of people who make mistakes, but our God is not a God of shame.

And even more, our God is not a God who cuts us off when we make the wrong choice or fall into a bad habit. God might convict us about our behavior and prompt us to do better, but our God is not a God who removes us from the family. In the story of Moses, God remains in relationship with him, and God calls on him by name for a specific purpose. God cares about Moses, and God tells him that there is hope for his future, and hope for the collective future of the Israelites.

The same is true for you. My friends, if you've made a choice that you regret, or have been displaced by shame in any way, today is the day when you can start to write a new story. God isn't done with you yet.

Today is the day you can take a step to rebuild a relationship, or reach out to someone that you withdrew from in a moment of vulnerability. Today is the day when you can reconnect with someone that shame kept you separated from, today is the day when you can correct a mistake and begin to make amends. Today is the day when you can stop living like a stranger, and this week could be the time that you start a new chapter. Let's write it together. Amen.