

July 21: Displaced God (*Philippians 2:1-11*) – Pastor Heather McDaniel

Good morning, fellow travelers on the way – today we are at the very center of our summer series on displacement and finding home together. To be displaced is to be moved from our usual or proper place, from where we belong, & it can apply to tangible things like individuals or intangible things like emotions. Displacement happens to all of us, and whether it's temporary or permanent, chosen or thrust upon us, the same underlying feelings often affect us: a sense of disorientation, confusion, and loss of control. We might feel adrift or lost; anxious and afraid; or maybe insecure or bitter.

We began our series with Biblical stories of people who were involuntary displaced: like Hagar, the enslaved servant of Sarah who was forced to bear Abraham's child and then banished to the desert; Elijah, who suffered displacement of purpose and vocation; and the Samaritan woman, who experienced social displacement. This month, we transitioned to stories of men and women who chose to be displaced. Last week, Pastor Meg preached about Ruth, who tenaciously clung to her mother-in-law Naomi, leaving her home and becoming a vulnerable immigrant in a foreign land. Her quiet courage brought healing to Naomi and changed the course of history. Today, we're going to focus on the story of one of Ruth's great-great-great-great grandsons, who chose radical displacement and vulnerability so that we might all be healed and find home. It's appropriate that we are at the center of our series, because this is the central story of displacement that touches and encompasses all others. Please pray with me before we dive in.

Jesus, thank you for choosing to be with us. Thank you that our story matters so much to you that you entered into it and you live it with us. Please give us the courage we need to follow you where you go and do what you do. Amen.

In my sermon kicking off our summer series on displacement, I shared a little bit about my own background – how I spent 12 of my growing-up years in Bangladesh and Kenya, where my parents did public health work. It was a wonderful way to grow up, and I wouldn't exchange it for anything. But along with all the good memories, I was also exposed, from a very young age, to profound human suffering and injustice: babies who died because of polluted water or malnutrition; parents who worked hard every day of their lives, only to have their savings wiped away by powerful people who prospered from

their corruption; women abused and abandoned; children orphaned and perishing in the AIDS epidemic; and whole families displaced, broken, and traumatized because of war and genocide that went on and on. These things shaped me, in the same way that suffering and the brokenness of the world has shaped each one of us.

When I was a teenager, I read through the whole Bible for the first time. And when I came to the book of Job, I discovered that Job asked the same kind of questions I struggled with: why does a just God allow the wicked to prosper while innocent people suffer? Why does the Almighty allow people to be born into lives of extreme poverty and sickness? Unimpressed by his friends' platitudes, Job demanded that God come down to personally address his complaints – and near the end of the book, God actually shows up and answers Job from a whirlwind – and at this point in my reading, I got really excited. Finally, I thought, I was going to learn, from God's own mouth, why God allows suffering and injustice to exist! And then I read God's reply to Job, and got to the end, and then desperately went back and reread it. I paged frantically back and forth through God's response to Job until the infuriating reality set in: God never explains why injustice and suffering exist. God's own presence and person, and God's wild and wonderful and uncontrollable and inscrutable creation that surrounds us – that's the response that Job gets. And I wasn't just disappointed; I was mad – what a bait and switch! In that moment, I think I realized that a lot of my "whys" would never be thoroughly answered. Over thirty years later, I still wrestle, and I don't expect that to change.

But here's what I do hold onto, the belief that is at the core of my faith: I follow a God who responded to the reality of human suffering not by explaining it or intervening from afar, but by letting go of all of the privileges that God so rightly deserved, and committing to full solidarity, vulnerability, and identification with suffering humanity. I worship a God who chose radical displacement in order to be with us as a human being, to fully share our suffering and vulnerability and pain, to be crushed by the injustice that crushes the powerless in our world, and to infuse divine love and healing and grace and justice into the midst of our dysfunction, transforming us and our world from the inside out.

The passage that we read today is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippian church, and it includes what many scholars believe to be a worship hymn, sung by the early church, which traces the journey of radical displacement that Jesus walked out of love for us. It praises Jesus,

⁶Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own
advantage;
⁷rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a slave,
being made in human likeness.
⁸And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross! (Philippians 2:6-8)

Jesus did not simply walk in solidarity with us giving up his privilege and place as God in Heaven and becoming human. He went much further than that. He walked the path of the most vulnerable and powerless among us, and he consistently rejected power and privilege and broke boundaries in order to identify with the marginalized and with outsiders. Jesus knows what it feels like to be displaced, both as God and as a human being.

Jesus was a Jew in the first-century Roman empire: part of a minority, non-citizen ethnic group in a conquered and occupied territory. He had no political rights, and he regularly experienced the indignities of being under the control of Roman overlords. He was conceived by a single woman whose pregnancy would have engendered gossip and social shame. He was born poor, far away from home and extended family and his first bed was an animal feeding trough. While he was still a baby, he became the target of politically-motivated violence, and he and his family became refugees, fleeing to Egypt, where he spent a significant part of his childhood. As a third-culture kid, I like to wonder how that sojourn shaped Jesus – did he speak Egyptian? Did he feel at home in Egypt? When Jesus’ family returned to Palestine, it wasn’t to their hometown – it was too dangerous to live there. They moved to Nazareth, where they had to begin all over again. I think that Jesus knew what it was like to be an in-between person in a culture you “belong” to but didn’t grow up in.

But Jesus’ displacement didn’t end with his childhood. Once he began his three years of active ministry, in his thirties, he chose to be homeless, dependent on the generosity of some of his female disciples as well as others he met on the road. He disappointed his own family, who disapproved of his work and tried to stop him, and he was rejected by the people of his hometown, friends he had worked with and played with and eaten with and lived with. He journeyed

to places that respectable Jews weren't supposed to go, and shattered cultural mores by doing things like hanging out alone and having a deep conversation with a single Samaritan woman. He touched people others feared and let despised and unclean women touch him. He hung out with the kind of people that got labeled as the "dregs of society" and respectable people pointed him out as a glutton, drunkard, and friend of sinners. He got down on his knees to do the work of a slave, washing the feet on his own followers. Like Elijah, he was opposed and maligned by religious and political leadership, and his ministry came to an abrupt end after just three years. Jesus refused to use the power he had to resist arrest and instead suffered through the betrayal, denial, and desertion of his closest disciples, an unjust and corrupt trial where person after person lied about him, the mocking and torture of a callous mob, and the pain and shame of a brutal public execution.

In the first century Greco-Roman culture in which Jesus lived and the church began, your place in society and in life was determined by how much social honor you were able to embody and accrue; the opposite of social honor was shame, which was avoided at all costs. People on the top of society's ladder were those with power and positions of high honor, and everybody wanted to climb towards them by meeting societal expectations and forming a patronage relationship with someone above them on the ladder. Near the bottom of the ladder were enslaved people, and even lower than them were those considered "expendable", meaning they had nothing to contribute to society: widows, orphans, prisoners, beggars, and people with disabilities. These were people carrying heavy burdens of shame, and it was considered shameful to associate with them; it dragged you down the ladder rather than boosting you. And the public spectacle of crucifixion was as low as you could go – the ultimate shame. It's no wonder that Jesus was deserted by most of his followers at his crucifixion.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was radically countercultural. He not only chose to serve and befriend the "shameful" and "expendable" people at the bottom of society's ladder. He became one of them. Jesus' downward journey of self-emptying and shame is what the passage in Philippians 2 is describing. Even though he was born into the lineage of Abraham's wife Sarah, an honorable and free woman, Jesus chose identification with Hagar, the rejected and enslaved mistress of Sarah, by taking on the very nature of a slave. And then he went even lower, accepting the shame of the cross and all that went with it. I cannot imagine a greater displacement for the God of the universe.

Through his human journey, Jesus experienced our full range of human emotions and physical reactions: joy, frustration, excitement, sadness, fatigue, anger, disappointment, exultation, anguish, loneliness, pain. But here is where he differed from us: at every moment of his life, as Jesus bore shame, rejection, abandonment, false accusations and injustice, even when he hung on the cross in agony and was mocked, Jesus' love endured, pure and unchanged and powerful. Jesus' courage and hope and faith and ability to walk in rhythm with the loving heart of God – those things did not waver. Jesus took the divine love and life he embodied into the places of suffering that he entered, and he lived out healing and justice and new life, transforming the lives of those he walked with. And when Jesus, with a loud cry to God, drew his final breath, he took that divine love and life down through the gates of death and into hell, and even there, his love endured – overcoming evil and turning death backwards on itself, so that death itself was defeated and gave way to new life. Jesus' response to injustice and suffering in our world was to displace himself from divine glory to be with us, immersing himself in the waters of our suffering, in the words of Saint Bonaventure, "from the sole of his foot to the top of his head," in order that he might draw us out totally from those sufferings.

When we trust and follow Jesus, we trust and follow a God who chose radical personal displacement so that we might all find home and be healed. And as I meditated on this story and what it means for us right now in our own contexts, there are three thoughts that stood out to me about what it looks like to follow a displaced God.

First, no matter what is happening in your life right now, and no matter what kind of road you are walking, you are not alone. Jesus has walked your path, Jesus understands and shares your pain and suffering, and Jesus walks with you now. There is nowhere you can go that Jesus has not gone and will not go with you. Even in death and beyond, Jesus has paved the way for you, and Jesus' love and life are waiting there to welcome you home. There is nothing to fear. And if you struggle to hold hope or love or courage or endurance or to choose life or forgiveness, if you feel trapped in your own brokenness, lean into Jesus. He is with you, he has what you need, he never shames you for your neediness, and his grace and love for you are never-failing.

And when you look at our world and those around us and your heart aches because of the suffering and injustice and violence and war that fill our news and our communities, and you wonder where God is in the midst of the

world's pain, I believe that God is not looking on from afar but is here, found in the midst of those who are poor in spirit and who the world sees as the "least of these", who mourn and suffer violence and have no recourse for what is done for them. This is not the end. Jesus' justice and love will endure & prevail.

Secondly, the story of Jesus as our displaced God gives us a model for how to respond to the suffering in our own world. In the Philippians passage, Paul calls on those who have experienced Jesus' compassion and comfort to follow him in his radical downward journey of displacement, of letting go of privilege and choosing solidarity with those who suffer.

I grew up with a front-row seat to health and development work in situations of extreme poverty, and one of the things I learned is that transformation is never fast or easy. There's no silver bullet. It's messy and frustrating and often heartbreaking, and if you are going to stay in that work for the long haul, you have to accept personal displacement and choose humility – it's the only way to develop the compassion and solidarity that will keep you going. Two weeks ago, Pastor Meg preached about Moses as a young man burning with idealism, and how he tried to bring justice and change from his position of Egyptian privilege – first by killing a cruel Egyptian overseer, and then by adjudicating a fight between two Hebrew men. He failed hard – he crashed and burned and fled to the wilderness for 40 years, with plans to never return. In a similar way, I've watched idealistic humanitarian leaders fly in from wealthy Western countries, full of ambitious plans of how to end poverty and change the world, only to crash and burn and fail or become cynical and hardened and flee. People who stay the course and make a difference are those who accept personal displacement and the vulnerability that comes with it, and who choose to be present with those who suffer rather than trying to fix them from afar. It wasn't until Moses responded to God's calling by relinquishing all Egyptian privilege, choosing full solidarity with his enslaved people, and returning to the scene of his failure that he was able to lead them to freedom – and even then, it wasn't an easy process, and he died before getting them to the promised land.

To voluntarily displace ourselves from places of privilege or comfort in order to be with others in their long and winding journey, where they are, isn't easy or comfortable – but it's powerful, and we can do it in small ways or big ways. To sit with somebody new here in church and get to know them rather than hanging out with people we're comfortable with – that's a small displacement

that can make a difference, even when it feels awkward. Many of us are walking with a friend or loved one through a prolonged illness or recovery from addiction, and that is also a kind of displacement that is difficult, but life-giving. And to find ways to be in community with people on the margins who experience the injustice we're usually shielded from, to face that injustice with them and walk and advocate in solidarity with them over a prolonged period of time – that is a very deep kind of displacement. It will cost us something, and it will lead us through suffering. But that is the path to transformation, and it's the path Jesus, our displaced God, leads us on.

When we find ourselves called to displacement into situations or places of brokenness and suffering and injustice, we can feel fear: fear of the pain we will witness and help to bear; and fear that we won't know what to do or how to help. But here's the third thing I wanted to share about following Jesus, our displaced God: When we enter into hard places or situations to be with those who are suffering, when we let go of our privilege to be in solidarity with others, we don't just bring Jesus with us. We find that Jesus is already there, already at work, already at home among those in the margins, and we join him in the work of compassion and redemption. And even though there will be suffering and pain in our displacement, there is also a deep joy in this journey. You find that joy throughout Paul's letter to the Philippians, even though he's writing it from a prison cell – it's overflowing with joy. The writer of Hebrews says that for the joy set before him, Jesus endured the pain of the cross, scorning its shame.

Perhaps this kind of counterintuitive, deep joy is only available to us when we follow Jesus into displacement, when we find him amidst suffering and pain and participate with him in the messy work of redemption and healing. My prayer is that we might all know and be ever surprised by this joy as we go out in peace to love and to serve, as we carry Jesus' love into our hurting world and find Jesus there waiting for us. Amen.