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Merry Christmas!

Several years ago I traveled to southern Utah to find and visit the site where an ancestor of mine was murdered in a wagon train massacre on his way from Arkansas to California in 1857. The several sites of the ambush are now identified by national park historical markers. It's all sort of out in the middle of nowhere, but near the main site live an old-timer and his wife, and he has taken it upon himself to keep watch to make sure the place is never vandalized or desecrated. So after we had been there a few minutes he rolled up to see who we were. But once he figured out we were okay he became very friendly and started showing us around and pointing out things we would not have noticed on our own. The National Parks Service has taken over a plot of land for the memorial, but around it on all sides are fields planted in corn by the local farmers. We happened to be there right after the corn had been harvested, so the fields were covered only in the short, brittle stalks left by the harvesters, but the old man pointed out to me that running across the fields, faint but absolutely discernible (once he showed me), were two parallel, perfectly straight, corn-yellow lines drawn with Goliath's ruler through this high mountain pass and continuing to the horizon. They are the wagon wheel ruts of those settlers who had passed this way before, over a century and a half earlier. Including my ancestor, who got this far and no farther. All of them gone now, but for this enduring ghostly sign of the journey and the travails, and also the hopes and desires, and the dreaming, of those long-ago courageous and faithful who came through on their way to a better life.

Some years ago I was hiking up and down across a mountain range in New Hampshire, and on one occasion, after reaching the summit my hiking partners and I were making our way back down the mountain, and as I approached a muddy patch in the trail I saw ahead of me my own footprints coming up the trail. I saw the feet of my younger self striding toward me out of the past, still on the ascent, still in anticipation of the peak high above. I thought, I know more now, I've seen more, than I had when I laid these tracks. I had been to the top, and I had received as my reward that particular outlook and perspective on this green earth that only the high places can give, and I was different now. I thought about all of the routes I have walked over this planet in my time, and the things I have seen and the learnings that have come to me out of the walking itself and the worlds I have passed through. Whether that was four or five hours ago as it was on that summertime mountainside, or over the years and years of my living. And how all of that walking, the making of journeys and pilgrimages, has shaped me, changed me and transformed me very much without my always being aware of it.

I find it bracing, and moving, to see the ways in which we write the record of our earthly sojourn onto the surface of the planet with our feet. What trails, faint but discernible, do we leave behind ourselves, the footprints we have set down, the paths we have forged? What ghosts? What record do we leave of all our journeying in this big ancient world?

The writer Michael Chabon wrote that "childhood is a map," and I thought, "yes, of course; I remember: criss-crossed on a bright red bicycle." But he continued: "Most great stories of adventure, from *The Hobbit* to *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, come furnished with a map. That's because every story of adventure is in part the story of a landscape, of the interrelationship between human beings ... and topography... But I think there is another, deeper reason for the reliable presence of maps in the pages, or on the endpapers, of an adventure story, whether that story is imaginatively or factually true... Art is a form of exploration, of sailing off into the unknown alone, heading for those unmarked places on the map."

Art, yes, and theology, mythology, story-telling and scripture. If *The Lord of the Rings* and *Treasure Island* come with maps, so too does the Bible, tucked into those last pages of the book. Not just for the historicity of it, not only for study, but so that we may locate our deepest mythic realities in the dust and bedrock and deserts and rivers, and the high places and low places of the ordinariness of our own home; that we may trace the paths of giants, heroes and gods through the lands and peoples of our own world.

In August I stood in Jordan, facing a broad beige expanse of sun-baked hardpan land with Katia and Ahmed, my guide and our driver. With a broad sweep of her arm Katia told me that Moses and the Hebrew people, wandering up out of Egypt, had passed over this plain, between the mountains on the right and the mountains on the left, until, she said, pointing north, they came to the land of the Moabites, and turning away from that peril they threaded their way instead through the Arnon Rift down to the Dead Sea. Remember, she said, I showed you that this morning. Do you see it?

I could see it. I could see it on land still dotted with Bedouin tents and flocks of rangy, skinny goats, and still crossed by camel caravans. "Israel-Palestine is the Holy Land," Katia observed, "but this is the land of the Bible."

These long-ago paths and trails and highways and side roads on which things happened which have shaped and continue to shape the life and truth and purpose of human existence - that burnish history, that cover time in a rich coppery patina - these ancient journeyings - are what are called by the writer Robert Macfarlane *The Old Ways*. Paths dug into the earth by people over and over and over who walked in the footsteps of their forebears, who came from someplace and were on their way to someplace, and in the movement itself they told with their feet the story of God and people and hope and possibility. Of miracles and wonders grown faint with time but still discernible. When we walk the Old Ways, or even just turn to the back of the book and trace those lines with our finger on the maps, it roots us into a story vast and wonderful and terrifying, as old as the earth and as new as an upwelling hope. And we find ourselves. We come to ourselves. Where and who we are.

The Bible is a book of wanderings. Of people moved by God to leave their place of familiarity and safety and to set out on unknown or dangerous roads, to learn by and from the traveling, to see the new thing God is doing, and to come through everything remade into a new people, a nation of righteousness, a kingdom of priests. After the mythological beginnings of the Old Testament, the first word spoken in the scriptures by God to a human being was "Go." Go, Abraham, from the house of your father to a land you will not know or recognize until you come to it, find it, and I reveal it to you. Go, Abraham from your home. So the Jews still say "A wandering Aramean was my father, who went down to Egypt and sojourned there." Until, that is, they were driven into the wilderness and wandered in the desert for forty years and came finally to the Promised Land. Until they were conquered by armies from the east and

wrenched from that land and led away under the yoke of foreign bondage. The promises made to Abraham, the Exodus of Moses, and the Exile of the Prophets, these long narratives of movement and discovery, defined and determined the lives and faith of the Hebrew people, and so necessarily also of the Jews and Christians who came forth from them. These were the ones who laid down the Old Ways, who carved with their feet paths and trails over virgin land, and left the record, faint but discernible, of their journey in and into God, of their yearning for the Messiah, of their prayers for redemption and release.

The story of the birth of Christ is their story too, and it is just such a story of wandering. It is the story of the Old Ways and those who followed them, and of the ones who listened for the voice of God. It is the story of wagon ruts growing faint under sun and rain, and of the prints of horsehooves and sandaled feet, and the shock of coming across one's own footprints in the coming and going and in the unexpected place. Of hopes and desires, and dreams.

The story begins with Joseph, and the journey he made with his wife from Galilee to Jerusalem to Bethlehem. A journey which with a pregnant woman on the back of a donkey or stumbling along on foot might have taken them weeks. Put your finger on the map and trace their way: Over the high places and then the downward plunge eastward to sea level, skirting the salty shore of the Dead Sea, and finally the arduous almost 2000 foot climb in elevation from Jericho up to Jerusalem. Over boulder strewn heights and dry wadis. Through villages and vast empty expanses wild and waste, and brigands on the roads. This was a journey which peeled back the layers of history as they moved deeper into the Old Ways and back to the long ago kingship of David. The land was dangerous and full of hardship and no welcome for them at the end, but it was land on which the promises of God had been made and kept, where a people came to know God and trust God, and where they had once been built up as a mighty nation, and as Joseph began that journey, driven not by God but by Caesar, he must have nonetheless recalled that first word spoken by God to his ancestor Abraham: go from your home to a place I will show you, and then quickened with wonder at what God might yet do in their seeing.

And then, in the appointed place, Mary gave birth to the child, and wrapped him, and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough where animals come, because they were wanderers and there was no place for them in Bethlehem. The birth of the Messiah is contained in a single sentence. It is Jesus' story but it is just as much, or may I say more so, the story of other people; of shepherds in the hills who saw something that seemed to them like angels and heard something that seemed to them like song, and made another journey, down out of the hills to Bethlehem to see the newborn one. In time kings and wizards would make a longer pilgrimage, across nations and over borders, through strange lands and peoples, following the star of their astrological study, to come as Joseph and Mary had before them, and as the Shepherds did too, to look upon the child. Who they discovered was the reason they left home and the object of their forward seeking and desiring, and somehow in that mystery saw an ordinary infant child and found satisfaction for their wondering too.

And it may be that there was something about the child himself which was their teacher when they came to Bethlehem. It may be that a glance into those newly opened curious eyes told them everything they needed to know. Or it may be that people who pay attention to their dreams and then act on them are more ready to leap into the unknown than others. Or it may be that people who claim to see messages in the stars, or believe in angels and imagine that they have seen them are able to approach the impossible with a credulity of which other people may not be capable.

But I think that it may be simply that by coming to Bethlehem along the Old Ways, over ground through which people had long passed, where things happened that mattered, where God had never been inactive, where people had long learned how to know God that they might discover that they were known in turn, and where the cries of a people of burning hearts still echoed among the rocks - it may be that the journey itself was the instruction, and the preparation, for seeing and believing and pondering, and there was a wisdom in the Old Ways and the ancient roads themselves that unfolded for those who traveled through them. It may be that they walked their way into readiness and then walked their way into understanding. And it may be that the journey in itself opened them in heart and spirit, and anticipation, to believe that God might even now be making a new creation. For the Klinchon people of Canada, the word for *knowledge* and the word for *footprint* are the same word. I m so glad to learn that, and I find that knowledge thrilling. And wonderfully biblical. Maybe this is why we pace when our minds are troubled, or go for long walks when everything on which we depend has come undone, or traverse the curving path of the labyrinth when we are trying to pray and cannot. We walk ourselves into wisdom. Certainly it is why people of faith make pilgrimage, and why they come home different. Like shepherds and wise men, and certainly like Mary and Joseph.

I am convinced that the power of the Christmas story is not only the revelation of the newborn child, but just as poignant is that for each of the people who made these journeys and came into the presence of the child it became also the unfolding of their own selves, the rediscovery of themselves before God, the rediscovery of themselves before the world, the rediscovery of themselves before their own eyes. And the shepherds told Mary all about it and about the angels and about how scared they were, and about being poor and yearny, and about cold nights spent outdoor in the hills, and about their traveling and she heard them out and attended to all of these things and pondered them in her heart.

Each of us has traced on the surface of the world a path which we have made by our years of walking. Miles and miles of journeying through all our days. Sometimes walking our crying baby at midnight, sometimes making our broken-hearted approach to graveside, sometimes walking up the aisle of the church to take the hand of our beloved, and sometimes just trudging to work or walking to the store or running for the bus. All of it sanctified by our needful and desiring hearts. And God's listening attention. But everything we have ever done and every place we have ever gone and all that matters to us and all that does not are recorded and remembered in the walks we have taken. And if those paths were suddenly revealed to us and we could see all of the footprints of our younger selves coming toward us again out of our past we would be shattered by it. Our hearts would lift or swell or break to pieces. They are our own Old Ways, the roads of our desiring - our old testaments - along which in a million different ways we have sometimes approached and sometimes run away from God. And that is just exactly how yours and mine - all our three thousand lifelong journeys - have converged here in this place, before this altar, just like Joseph and Mary and the shepherds and the magi who met each other in the stable when they all met Jesus for the first time. We too have come by the Old Ways into the presence of God. We came by the long road and brought our whole lives, with all that that means - the glory and the cost - that we might see the child and the newness of God. And have the journeys which brought us here vested with coherence and understanding, and like those who made their way to Bethlehem come to ourselves as we come to Jesus. Amen.

Merry Christmas!