

Text: Exodus 3:1-15 & Matthew 16:21-28
“Paths are about Connections”
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After finishing my two-year spirituality program called “Living School” at the end of August, I looked forward to my flight home with time to read something other than spirituality books! Wonderfully, I came upon Robert Moor’s book entitled “On Trails”. Moor became fascinated with paths - how they are formed, who follows them and who creates new ones - after he hiked the 2,181 miles of the Appalachian Trail. His book tells that story and then his next seven years of traveling the globe exploring trails as small as minuscule fossil scratches and as large as Asian elephants trails in the jungle. Part of his research was done as a volunteer shepherd for a Navajo family. By the end of several weeks on the job, Moor learned that what looks like an unmarked wilderness is actually a web of paths evident to 4 and 2-legged animals alike.

That vignette from Moor’s book popped into my mind as I read today’s passage from Exodus. The story may say that Moses was in the “wilderness”, but , if Moor is correct, it is no unmarked place. To keep his father-in-law’s flock fed, Moses would have known which paths led to food and water and which did not. He was paying attention in order to do his job of pointing the herd in the right direction. Mose was paying attention to the path, even in the wilderness. That path brought Moses to a significant juncture in his life and to a connection with more than sheep.

Trails are about connection.

In our gospel reading, there’s another path. Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem and if Moor’s research is correct, beneath Jesus’ feet is a well-worn animal trail. But, by the time Jesus is paying attention to that path, the dirt has been packed down by thousands of sandaled feet and dozens of cart and chariot wheels. But the natural history of the road is not on Jesus’ mind that day. He is paying attention to a political and symbolic route. He’s on the path where realm and religious power connect in Jerusalem, the capital of Palestine, ancient city of King David and now seat of Herod, Rome’s figurehead. As Jesus travels this path, he is connecting the end of his earthly life “at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes” with God’s new life for him and all creation.

At this point, I want to come back into Robert Moor’s book, “On Trails”. Surprising to me, in his last chapter, Moor guides the reader into an exploration of trails as being more than convenience and survival. Moor discovers that we, like all creatures, are social beings so paths are meant to connect all aspects of creation - from ancient fossils to interstellar space. Moor sees how paths are ways we transcend ourselves. A trail started by coyotes tramping down prairie grasses grows into a wider passage as buffalo migrate through the seasons. The same trail later becomes a way for the indigenous people to hunt and then used by white settlers to invade and possess the land. Those crisscrossing trails later are paved and given numbers like Route 66 and names like the Kansas Turnpike. This building of one layer on another finally transcend even the visible on the ground as we enter cyberspace in web and orbits. Moor’s exploration of trails reminds us of the vast world possible by the expansion and use of trails in our natural world.

A closer look at our two biblical stories reveals each one contains another path, an inner path which takes both Moses and Jesus to a deeper meaning and purpose than can be seen on the surface their feet travel. By paying attention to more than a path for the sheep, Moses is drawn deeper inside himself. Through a vision of a bush which burns but is not consumed, Moses finds himself on an inner path. He stands on holy ground. With feet bare and his senses engaged, Moses is opened to an inner journey, to a life and place where he and the Holy, "I AM" connect to offer freedom to the oppressed.

God invites Moses to venture on an unknown and mysterious path. On this spiritual path, landmarks are not on a map and must be discovered. Directions can only be discerned by trusting one step after another. In some amazing way, Moses, a murderer and fugitive from Pharaoh, is invited to trust this inner path to a intimate relationship with God. Paths are about connections

In a similar way, God invited Jesus on an inner path to his own unique relationship with God. No burning bush this time. On his holy ground in the wilderness, Jesus had three visions of what truly feeds the deepest hunger of safety and survival, of esteem and affection, of control and power. Here Jesus began his inner journey to let go of the ego's temptation. From the start of his ministry, Jesus practiced how to lose one's life in order to find true life. Later, when Peter tempts Jesus to only pay attention to the outer path, Jesus instantly snaps back to his wilderness experience. "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus seems to say, "I need to keep on my inner journey". What lies ahead in Jerusalem is an inner journey, the true path and relationship with God.

Like Moses and Jesus, we all travel our own outer path. Outer paths mark our way in the world. They have been formed by many before us. We share the outer path with companions every day. Yet, our inner spiritual paths are uniquely formed and personally our own. Finding that place within us is our own soul's work. And while there are several maps detailed by those before us, it is finally our work to find our own way.

In the two years I spent in Living School, my outer journey was marked by readings and conversations. What a privilege! Besides this outer path, wonderfully I discovered my inner path to be a form of Christian meditation called "centering prayer". And recently, I discovered there is a map to this centering prayer form contained in the familiar prayer that begins our worship each Sunday morning.

This ancient prayer shows a trail to the soul place within each of us. This path leads us to a place, like Moses and Jesus, where we lose our lives in order to find our life in God. It is path discovered by the practice of letting go of the egos and agendas given us by the outer world, and, instead, letting go and living on trust in God. This prayer marks the trail: "Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open" is an invitation to be still and quiet in the deepest place within us. "all desires known and no secrets are hid" acknowledges that thoughts/feelings/memories/plans will come into our mind. We aren't to stop them from entering our minds because then we will think more about them. So, the prayer moves us to let the thoughts/feelings/memories/plans go: "Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts". This deep letting go can only happen "by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit".

In centering prayer, we do nothing, we produce nothing, we earn nothing. We say nothing. We just sink and fall into God's love. By following the path of Christ, who emptied himself to become human, so we, emptying ourselves, might become holy. On this path, on this trail, we get connected to our deepest self and to God. Amen.