



E-DEVO

Gay Street United Methodist Church

Reflection-Rev. Karen Oehl

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Not All Those Who Wander Are Lost

Jacob got up during the night, took his two wives, his two women servants, and his eleven sons, and crossed the Jabbok River's shallow water. Genesis 32:22

Jacob was coming home after years spent away from his brother Esau, whom he had cheated and tricked out of blessing and birthright. Jacob had been away from home because he was running away and even after years he was uncertain of his welcome. He had wandered out of fear, but now he wanted to come home.

Not all those who wander are lost. A familiar (and favorite of mine) line from J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings epic tale. In those books, these words refer to a king in exile, working tirelessly to protect the lands from evil.

Some who wander do so out of fear, like Jacob. Moses went into the wilderness after killing an Egyptian. Elijah went into the wilderness when the queen threatened to kill him. The wilderness is a place to shelter, but also to find God and one's purpose in God. Jacob built up a family that would be the foundation of the tribes of Israel. Moses met God in the burning bush and was called to lead his people out of slavery. Elijah heard God in sheer silence and was given the task of anointing new leadership.

In the Bible the wilderness is a place of escape but not exile, a beginning rather than an ending. Abraham travels the lands that will someday belong to his descendants. The Hebrews are shaped as a people in their forty years of travel. John the Baptist begins the work of changing hearts and lives that Jesus will take up. Jesus uses the wilderness for prayer and teaching. On the wilderness road between Jericho and Jerusalem a lot can happen.

I think of all the wandering that I have done in my life. As a preacher's kid and minister myself I have spent most of my life moving from parsonage to parsonage. The first thing that I do when I move to a new place is to wander through the area on foot or by car. I have had a variety of work experiences, have traveled to different countries, have read many, many books which have helped me to wander through space and time. I wander not because I am lost, but because this is the way I make myself at home, wherever I am. And wherever I find myself, the great "I AM" is there already.