

I noticed last year that the state of Indiana changed its license plate format. It was done without asking our approval, probably in the name of efficiency. More bad decisions are made for the sake of efficiency than for any other reason. For much of my driving life I was a 32 A driver, 32 being Hendricks County and A being Danville. It made a great deal of sense to arrange our license plates that way, since every fourth grade Hoosier child had to memorize the Indiana counties in alphabetical order and you could tell at a glance where someone lived. If you were driving through Tennessee and saw a 6 A pull alongside, you could stick your head out the window and yell "Lebanon" and they would smile and wave. Now we can't do that and the camaraderie of the road has been lost.

I learned long division from those license plates, sitting in the front seat between my father and mother, who would read out the license plate numbers of the cars passing us. "49A3528," my father would say, and I would divide 3,528 by 49 in my head. "72," I would shout, after a little while, after my mother had whispered the answer in my ear. This was back before car stereos, when cars were limited to AM radios, so that by comparison even math was preferable.

Thus, I grew up well-disposed to travel. At some point, I lost my appreciation for the journey, preferring the comfortable, the known.

But this past week, as I was reading about Jesus' birth, it occurred to me how often in the Bible travel was the stage on which either great spiritual lessons were learned, or significant spiritual progress was experienced. It was in the wilderness, on a 40-year wandering from Egypt to Canaan, that the nation Israel was born. It was on a journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem that Mary felt the pangs of birth and Jesus was born. The magi traveled to Bethlehem, the star going before them, and there they found Jesus, and returned home a different way, as changed people. It was on the road to Damascus that Paul heard a voice and was stunned into silence, then transformation, then new life. And after Jesus was crucified, and his disciples were discouraged, it was on the road to Emmaus where he appeared to them, blessed them, gave them hope, and taught them that shoots of life can sprout in the most barren ground. Throughout the Bible is this delightful motif of God taking people on journeys to teach them some great truth.

There are two bodies of water near my home. One is a lake, the other a creek. The water that moves stays fresh. The water that settles grows stagnant. So it is with our spiritual lives.

I was speaking with a group of pastors last year about spiritual vitality and I asked them if any of them still believed the exact same things they did when they were kids. They all shook their heads no, except for this one man, who raised his hand and said, “My beliefs haven’t changed since I was seven years-old and took my first communion.” I thought he was joking, so I chuckled, then moved on. Several people came up to me later and said, “He wasn’t kidding. He is the dullest, most unimaginative pastor in our area. He’s killed every church he’s ever pastored.”

He was still water. Don’t believe all you’ve heard about still water. It might run deep. But it also grows stagnant.

Whenever God had to revive a nation, or a group, or a person, God put them in motion. This tells us faith is a verb. It is active, learned in the journey of life. It isn’t something we arrive at early in life once and for all, and have confirmed, once and for all. Faith unfolds, as we experience life, as we face challenges, and suffer, and experience deep joy and love. All of these things, both bane and blessing, help us become mature and alive and wise and vital.

I've been corresponding with this man from Australia who'd happened upon our meeting's website and began e-mailing me about his spiritual life. He'd grown up in a fundamentalist household, but as an adult had read some books which caused him to rethink what he'd been taught as a child and he was excited, but also confused and scared that if he got it wrong, God would punish him. Now he's moving beyond that, and it has been so interesting watching his spiritual evolution. He wrote this week to tell me about the deep sense of peace he's beginning to experience in his life. He said he still has a lot of questions, but isn't worried, that he senses he has much time to learn and explore. It was just a joyful letter. There is now an appreciation for the journey.

There's a beautiful line in Matthew. He's talking about Jesus, but he quotes the prophet Isaiah. "The people who sit in darkness, have seen a great light." (Matthew 4:16) Jesus was God's way of moving us along. We were sitting in darkness, and God sent Jesus to get us moving, get us growing.

Now I'll tell you something I've come to believe. I believe God does this regularly. For our tendency is always to settle in and hunker down and stop thinking and stop growing. We're certain we know the truth, that there's nothing more to learn, and we become stale and stuck and stagnant and we sit in darkness.

So God sends light.

For first-century Israel, it was a baby.

For the magi, a star.

For Paul, it was a blinding flash on a road.

For my friend in Australia, it was a book.

But the purpose is always to keep us moving, keep us growing.

Are you moving?

Are you learning?

Are you growing?

Are you, like the magi, moving toward the Light?