

I had a Geography professor in college who claimed that his discipline was THE bridge discipline between all of the natural sciences on the one hand and all of the social sciences on the other. After all, geography encompasses both the physical aspects of the surface of the earth along with the interactions of the human beings who inhabit the earth. That makes geography quite a broad discipline, dealing on the one hand with wind, water, and land, and dealing on the other hand with human cultures and human communities. As many of you may know, Jeff Lee and Linda Jones both teach geography at Tech, with Jeff leaning more on the physical side of geography, and Linda dealing more with human geography.

But there's another kind of geography that's not taught in Texas Tech's Department of Geosciences. Yet this kind of geography is also of importance. I'm speaking of spiritual geography.

The biblical story did not arise in a geographical vacuum. Instead God's interactions with his people were heavily dependent upon the geography of the ancient middle-east. In Judaism and Christianity there is a strong sense of holy places. And yet, God is not confined to holy places. In fact, there are also spiritual journeys and pilgrimages that are important parts of the biblical story.

And this idea of holy places and holy journeys is not just important in the biblical realm. It is also important in the lives of individual believers throughout the ages.

And this idea of geography is especially present in our section for this week's Parish Reading Project as we journey through Luke and Acts. We began with chapter 9 of Luke. Chapter 9 of Luke is the turning point for the Gospel geographically and spiritually. And to be more precise, chapter 9 and the beginning of chapter 10 are actually a series of transitions. It is actually a set of 5 turning points in the Gospel of Luke. It is veritable cascade of 5 pivot points upon which the Gospel of Luke hinges both geographically and spiritually.

This set of 5 turning points begins and ends with two mission trips. At the beginning of chapter 9 Jesus sends out the 12 apostles on a brief mission trip. There will later be a time when they will be sent out to take the Gospel to all the world. That time period is the setting for the sequel to Luke, the book of the Acts of the Apostles.

But for now, in chapter 9 of Luke, the 12 are sent out on a practice run. You might think of it as an internship, as student teaching, before they'll be sent out for real later on.

And there's a 2nd mission trip one chapter later at the beginning of chapter 10. Jesus this time sends out a group of about 70 of his disciples. Who are these folks? It doesn't say for sure, but here's where our old Sunday school pictures do us a disservice. When I was a kid the drawings always portrayed Jesus running around with the 12 apostles.

But scripture tells us that the time of Jesus' resurrection, Jesus' entourage, the nucleus of the Christian church numbered about 120.¹ And it's clear from the gospels that there were a

¹ Acts 1:15

number of women in this larger group.² So when Jesus sends out the 70, that group may or may not have included the 12 apostles. But it undoubtedly contained a good fraction of the larger group of the 120 followers who would become the original Christians.

So of the 5 turning points in Luke, the 1st and the 5th are about preparation for the disciples to take over Jesus' ministry after he leaves. Now, I don't think the disciples fully understand this yet. Over and over again, Jesus will try to prepare them for his upcoming death and resurrection. But it doesn't seem to sink in for the disciples until the events actually happen. But Jesus is very clear about what awaits him in Jerusalem. More on this in a bit.

But there are 3 more pivot points in Luke chapter 9.

The 2nd and 3rd pivot points takes place at the northeastern most extreme of Jesus' travels, at least as they come down to us in the Gospels.

The 2nd turning point is near Caesarea Philippi.³ Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter gives the gold-star answer:

"You are the Christ, (the Messiah) of God."⁴

That's an awesome statement of faith. Jesus is God's anointed. Now, again, the disciples, including Peter, don't know the totality of what this means. Jesus is operating from a different Messianic play-book than anyone else in Judaism. And Jesus will begin teaching them at this point what it means to be the true Messiah: he will have to undergo suffering and rejection and be killed.⁵ That's pivot point number 2.

The 3rd turning point takes place 8 days later. Jesus goes up a high mountain to pray. And while he is praying his appearance changes. His clothes become dazzling white. Literally Luke says that Jesus' clothes became white and flashing like lightning.⁶

And there Jesus is seen speaking with Moses and Elijah. And they are discussing, in Luke's words, Jesus' "departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem."⁷ And the literal word for "departure" is *exodos*.

On the one hand Jesus' upcoming departure, his upcoming exodus in Jerusalem will involve his death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven.

² See Luke 8:1-3

³ According to Mark and Matthew—Luke doesn't mention this place name—though he is quite thorough with naming the geography of what we would call Turkey, Greece, and Italy, he is not as thorough with places in what we would call Israel—this is probably due to Luke not having travelled much in this area, with the possible exception of landing on the coast and making a visit to Jerusalem

⁴ Lk 9:20

⁵ Lk 9:22

⁶ Lk 9:29; *leukos exastrapton*

⁷ Lk 9:31

But Exodus is also the title of a book of the Bible, a book about the departure of the Hebrew people from Egypt. Thus the word exodus doesn't just suggest mere departure. It also brings to mind the Jewish Exodus, the Jewish Passover, the time when God brought his people out of slavery in Egypt. It brings to mind the time when the blood of the lamb saved the Jewish people from death and brought them into freedom and new life.

And Jesus is discussing this with Moses and Elijah—his exodus which he is about to accomplish in Jerusalem. Jesus will suffer and die in Jerusalem. And yet his death will be the source of new life.

Which brings us to the 4th turning point. After leaving the Mount of Transfiguration, there is a change in geography. There is a change in direction. Luke says clearly and bluntly, "When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."⁸

Or as another translation says,
"As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem."⁹

And the next 9.5 chapters of Luke will focus on Jesus heading to Jerusalem. And the final 5.5 chapters will focus on him in Jerusalem. As I said in my newsletter article for April, Jerusalem will be the crucible, the intense place where Jesus will accomplish his work of salvation. It will also be the crucible that will form the disciples more and more into the Body of Christ, the group who will carry Jesus' message of love and life to the rest of the world, beginning from Jerusalem.

So in the spiritual geography of the Gospel of Luke, in chapter 9 we see Jesus as geographically distant from Jerusalem as he will ever get.

But he also is clear about his mission. He must go to Jerusalem. He must suffer and die. And he will rise from death and will ascend to heaven, all in Jerusalem.

And so, he sets his face to Jerusalem. He resolutely sets out for Jerusalem. That's his geographical journey from a physical standpoint. And it's also his spiritual journey.

And it's a part of our spiritual journeys as well. We are baptized into the body of Christ. That means we share in his death and resurrection. And we share in the new life he offers through his death every time we gather for Eucharist, every time we break the bread and share the cup.

And in that same chapter that Jesus sets his face and begins his journey to Jerusalem, Jesus invites us to deny ourselves, and take up our own crosses, and follow him.¹⁰ This is part of our spiritual journey, our spiritual geography as well.

⁸ Lk 9:51

⁹ Lk 9:51, NLT

¹⁰ Lk 9:23

But there's one more bit of spiritual geography here. In Luke, Jesus is explicitly in Jerusalem twice before. He probably made more trips, but Luke mentions 2 earlier visits to Jerusalem. Both visits are mentioned in chapter 1. The first was when Jesus was 40 days old. The 2nd when Jesus was 12 years old.

And there's a real sense in Luke that Jesus is in Jerusalem early on, as an infant and an older child. And then his journey takes him a long way away. And then he comes back to Jerusalem again.

And that often parallels our experiences with God. Now some Christians have a sense of being near God all their lives.

And some Christians never have a sense of God's presence early on, but then discover him later.

But it is also common for many Christians to experience the pattern of being close to God, and then drifting away, and then coming back. That's a very common spiritual journey for many people.

And I have to add that that's exactly what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel lesson today in the parable of the Prodigal Son. This parable will also be part of our Parish Reading Project section this coming week.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, we see that classic spiritual pattern of being close, drifting away, and coming back.

The younger son drifts away from his father. He is in a distant country. But then he decided to return home.

And his father's love is so great that while the son is still a long way off, the father runs to greet him. This is a powerful reminder from Jesus about the nature of God's love for us. Our heavenly Father longs for relationship with us. And even if we drift away, God is not only waiting to take us back. God is eager to meet us where we are if we turn back towards him.

And in that same parable there is the older brother who has stuck by his father's side the whole time. But he gets his feelings hurt when his father throws a party for the younger brother. So the older brother stays outside the party pouting. Though he has been close to his father, he too has turned away. The older brother doesn't travel as long a distance as his younger brother does. He just stays outside. But he too is experiencing separation.

And again, the father goes and seeks him out. Again, our Heavenly Father's love for us is so great, that whether we wander away to a far distant land, or get mad at him and are spiritually pouting, he longs to seek us out.

God longs to embrace us as his children. And God will go to extraordinary lengths to do so.

As our patron saint, St. Paul reminds us, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us."¹¹ While we were in a state of separation or turning away from God, God shows his love for us, God seeks to heal the breach in the cross of Jesus Christ. Through the death of Jesus, we are given life. Through the cross, we are offered intimate relationship with God as his children.

And so the spiritual geography of Luke involves Jesus focusing on that mission, setting his face to Jerusalem, resolutely journeying to the passion and cross and resurrection.

And our spiritual geography also focuses on that journey. Jesus invites us to take up our own crosses and follow. Jesus invites us to go to Jerusalem and share in his death so that we may share in his resurrection.

Jerusalem awaits us all. The cross awaits us all. Death awaits us all. The mortality rate on this planet is still 100%.

But on the other side of the cross is the empty tomb. On the other side of crucifixion is resurrection. On the other side of Jerusalem is that heavenly country scripture calls the new Jerusalem.

The new Jerusalem is a place of life and joy.

The new Jerusalem is a place where there is no more sorrow, no more crying, no more pain, no more death.¹²

The new Jerusalem is a place where all spiritual journeys will end, for there will never again be any separation from God. God will dwell in the midst of his people.¹³ God says, "I will be their God and they will be my children."¹⁴

Journey with your Lord to Jerusalem.
Walk the way of the cross.
Celebrate his resurrection.
And look forward to your own resurrection.
Look forward to your journey home.

¹¹ Romans 5:8

¹² Rev 21:4

¹³ Rev 21:3

¹⁴ Rev 21:7