

## “Journeys, Part 2”

*Isaiah 43:16, 19-20 & Matthew 2:Select Phrases*

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**Prayer for Understanding** Radiant God who grants seekers light; starlight, candlelight and sunlight help us receive your light. Speak to us, guide us, and reveal the most excellent way of love. Amen

We are in the season of Epiphany when we celebrate journeys, insightful moments, and transformations. Epiphany involves sharing stories of God experiences, restoration, and love. Life is a journey filled with unexpected ups and downs, twists and turns.

Last week we journeyed with the wise people, astrologers, magi, scholars. Listen again to aspects of the journey from excerpts from the gospel of Matthew. **Matthew 2:Select Phrases MSG “After Jesus was born in Bethlehem—a band of scholars arrived from the East. They asked around, “Where can we find and pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews? We observed a star in the eastern sky that signaled his birth. We are on pilgrimage to worship Jesus.” Then the star appeared again, the same star they had seen in the eastern skies. The star led them on until it hovered over the place of the child, Jesus. They could hardly contain themselves: They were in the right place! They had arrived at the right time! They entered the house and saw Jesus in the arms of Mary. Overcome, they kneeled and worshiped Jesus. Then they opened their luggage and presented gifts: gold, frankincense, myrrh. In a dream, they were warned not to report back to Herod. So they worked out another route, left the territory without being seen, and returned to their own country.”**

God offers an infinite variety of ways to experience God from main thoroughfares to windy, secluded, unique paths. God is continuously adding new ways to experience God and new ways to love and rejoice, for love and joy will expand forever. We are encouraged to not get bogged down in following old paths rather to discover new paths and encourage everyone to enjoy their distinctive path with God. The prophet Isaiah proclaims: **Isaiah 43:16, 19-20 MSG “This is what God says, the God who builds a road right through the ocean, who carves a path through pounding waves, forget about what has happened. Do not keep going over old history. Be alert, be present. I am about to do something brand-new. It is bursting out! Don’t you see it? There it is! I am making a road through the desert, rivers in the badlands. Wild animals will say ‘Thank you!’ The coyotes and the buzzards because I provided water in the desert, rivers through the sunbaked earth.**

My spiritual journey plotted on a graph is a squiggly line going all over the place, forwards and backwards, up and down, circling around. I am going to share a few snippets from my spiritual journey. I am telling the journey in my words, of what I heard, saw, and experienced and sharing what resonated in my memory. Actual words spoken were likely different, however this is what I remember. My hope in sharing is to reveal how I believe God loved in my life to mold me. Some of these experiences I believe was God communicating with me, however like many people in the Bible often humans have a distorted perception of God’s will and message. What I perceive as God experiences could be misunderstandings. Therefore, this sharing is not meant to judge anyone or lift any one perspective as better than another or declare that something is definitely God’s will. Israel means wrestlers with God. We are to journey, to wrestle, to question, what is God’s message for us in this particular situation. When I study history, religions, and cultures, I constantly remind myself that these are stories of people striving to love in their context. Everyone’s context is different. That is why my sermons are full of questions for you to do the work of perceiving what God’s message for you is. I believe that God’s message to two different people can be radically different. I perceive God as spacious with infinite ways for everyone to enjoy love.

Growing up, I had the same Sunday School teacher for several years. Once a year she would take down a picture she donated that hung in the church. This image is seared into my mind. On one side was a city on fire. There is a wide path crowded with people following numerous arrows that point them off a cliff into a devouring fire. A few people follow a narrow, unmarked path across the fiery chasm on a cross to a golden city on the far side. The teacher explained most people are going to burn in hell for eternity. You must stay on the straight narrow path if you want any chance of getting to heaven. Every lesson had some version of if you misbehave you will go to hell. You need to listen, respect your elders, live a good life, do everything in the Bible if you want to get to heaven. I perceived God as a judgmental, Presbyterian.

The pastor was a jovial jokester constantly proclaiming God’s grace. I perceived God as a joyful friend.

My parents were peaceful, caring, compassionate, loving, and encouraging. I perceived God as all of that and of course, God is a dairy farmer.

When Leslie and I were dating, we had deep theological discussions. She was Roman Catholic. Did we worship the same God? I was skeptical. I was confident that there was one way to understand God and worship God and it was only through the Presbyterian denomination. That Sunday School teacher's picture popped in my mind. If one is not Presbyterian, they are probably going off the cliff to hell. I spoke with a Roman Catholic priest, and he was certain that only Roman Catholics were going to heaven and everyone else was going to hell. Leslie and I meet with the Presbyterian pastor, and he talked about God's gracious love for all Christians, and that part of what drew Leslie and I together was our Christian practices. He pointed out the similarities of all Christian denominations. Later, I was a volunteer for an ecumenical youth ministry funded by the Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Baptist church. I perceived God as gracious, active in the lives of all Christians.

Before seminary, I used male pronouns for God. At seminary, I was fascinated to learn that in strands of the Jewish religion it is forbidden to pronounce, or write, God's name because the greatness of God is beyond human comprehension. All human language is restrictive of God's majesty. I was invited to learn from the many strands of Christianity not just the dominant strand that sought to scrub all the insights from the other strands away. For much of Christian history, the dominant strand killed those who did not profess the views of those in power. One example is male pronouns for God, a preference for two genders and elevating the male gender. There has always been strains of Christianity that used gender neutral pronouns for God and celebrates the feminine as equal with the masculine.

A lady shared her story with me. As a child she was repeatedly abused by her father. She shared the trauma of hearing male pronouns for God and the suffering of hearing God referred to as father. And it is not just one person she shared how most of her support group feels the same way. I believe God is far more glorious than any one gender. God is beyond gender. Aware of no benefits of using male pronouns for God I began using gender neutral pronouns. If you approach scripture with an open mind and read carefully you will notice people in the Bible who were gender fluid. There were several insightful gender fluid Christians that have been killed and their voice suppressed. There was a great variety of art with a diverse array of depictions of God, however only a narrow subset of white skinned art was purchased by the church and protected. I strive to not put God in a box by using only mainstream words, imagines, and teachings. I perceive God as glorious far beyond the restrictions of human language and binary thinking.

Seminary urged us to strive to perceive scripture with an open mind, free from the abundance of teachings that the church has added, some teachings causing a drift away from what scripture actually says. One example is hell, which is for the most part, a creation of the Roman Empire and the medieval church to control people and collect religious taxes. What is translated as hell in English were words that meant isolation, separation, and living outside the community. We explored how different Christianity might look today if say Irenaeus' theology was emphasized more instead of Augustine. Irenaeus believed God never punishes, everyone has opportunities to expand their love, and everyone goes to heaven. We explored how power and money influenced the church. For the first three hundred years, Christianity was diverse. In 380, the Roman Empire made Christianity the official religion of the empire and merged church and state. The church blended in Roman empire politics into Christian teachings to advance the Roman agenda. Later, the church did this again to justify the crusades, colonization, and capitalism. Context is important. Be aware how politics, power, and money has distorted Christian teachings. I am aware that I color everything and some of my understanding is way off. It is impossible to sum up history or someone's life, beliefs, or teachings in a book and certainly not in a few sentences. And we do it to learn and grow. And over time, this often leads to significant drift from the original perspective and what actually happened. The more I learn the more I realize there is even more to learn. I perceive God as infinite and expansive.

The Roman emperor wanted a unified empire with controlled citizens. He needed to get these Christians to agree, so creeds were created, and an emphasis was put on the law. Perhaps God worked through the Roman government to strip away the diversity and create a narrow, political endorsed way. It is helpful to realize that several Christian teachings were created by politicians as a means to govern people. What would Christianity look like today if the theologians advocating for additional books in the Bible were not silenced by the Roman empire? What would Christianity look like today if Celtic spirituality had become the dominant view which focuses on grace, views everyone as equal, all genders as equal, has little interest in hierarchy, creates space for each person to experience God in their own unique way, and celebrates experiences of God through creation. What would Christianity look like today in the United States if we had more Eastern Orthodox influence where heaven and hell are not viewed as places rather different perceptions of God's energy? Seminary urged us to be aware of the frame, lens, and previous teachings that influence our reading of scripture. If you come to scripture looking for something specific, you will likely find it but

that may not be God's message to you for this season. Seminary urged us to be skeptical of past interpretations of biblical passages for most insights have human distortion and that insight was for a different person at a different time. Much can be learned from mainstream western Christianity, and I respect those who choose this path. I am troubled when anyone tries to force the narrowness of mainstream western Christianity onto others. I am troubled when someone tries to legislate their view rather than honoring freedom. I have learned much about God from diverse, minority, theologians. I realize I have only just begun to explore the grand greatness of God. I perceive God as spacious, gracious, and loving beyond my comprehension.

I did my clinical pastoral education at a large hospital serving as a Chaplain. I was on call overnight once a week. My first overnight included being with seven people as they died, six level one traumas, responding to over forty crises, taking a family to the morgue, helping a person near death complete an advanced directive refusing more procedures, and in between those situations I served in the emergency room. It was a critical experience and a major shift to my journey and an experience I never want to go through again. There was a Roman Catholic priest serving as chaplain at the hospital. He explained as a parish priest I believed in plenty of rules. Here in this liminal space, thresholds, of birth and death the rules, institutions and religions dissolve away, and everyone experiences a connection with God. God loves everyone. Everyone is going to heaven. One day the priest invited me to serve the holy Eucharist with him. Roman Catholic rules stated a non-Catholic could not even partake of communion and certainly not serve communion. And we were in a hospital where rules, institutions, and religions dissolve away, and everyone is united in love. My Christian supervisor was adamant that I be aware of my feelings, experiences, background, beliefs, and everything that colors my perception of situations. She was adamant that I strive to strip all of my stuff out of my visits, including my narrow Christian beliefs so I could be fully present, connect with them, and strive to speak their spiritual language. I served people of various religions, faiths, spiritualities, agnostics, and atheists. No one at the threshold of death was concerned about my religion. In those moments one's religious practice was irrelevant, what mattered was loving connection. Every division fades away and all is united in love. My perception was God gave me words for I found myself saying things to people from different religions that I did not even understand what I was saying. I blessed babies that died shortly after birth. Religion dissolves away, all are loved by God, all go to heaven, all is in harmony. As people traveled through the portal of death, I had an intuition of their glorious joy in heaven. I wish I had words to describe the profound sense of peace, the glimpse of the resurrected's heavenly reunion, and the certainty with every fiber of my being that all people go to heaven where they are united in love for eternity. I perceived God as gracious, joyfully welcoming everyone home to heaven, God is love that unites all forever.

I saw hell. My perception is hell is not a place anyone goes after death. Hell is separation. Hell is a family waiting for hours to find out if their loved one in the trauma unit is going to live. Hell is two rival gangs filled with hate waiting for the news if their gang members will die plotting how they will get revenge killings. Hell is a child trying to understand why their newborn sibling who died cannot go home with them. Hell is medical staff that is devastated after they did everything and still the patient died. Hell is a couple fighting over whether to take their child off life support. Hell is pain, suffering, grief. Hell is patients kept alive by medical definitions through machines when their mind and soul have already traveled through death to everlasting life. I perceive hell as a state of separation, a broken love, that God is mending.

My ordination was at the church I grew up in. I noticed the picture of hell still on the wall and another picture on the opposite wall. It was a picture of a redwood forest. There was no visible trail and yet there were numerous ways one could take into the woods. One ray of light filtered down through the forest canopy. The picture was entitled "God is Light". The pastor who served at that church when I was a child came back to participate in my ordination. I asked him, how long has this picture been here? He commented that he put it up shortly after the hell picture was donated to provide another perspective. I was shocked that I never noticed the picture before. I realize I miss most of God's messages. I am aware that my experiences blind me to most of God's glory. I perceive God as having infinite facets of glory.

After every experience of God, I went back to scripture discovering that the supporting scriptural insight was there all along and yet I did not initially perceive it. I perceive that God has an abundance of diverse, radically different insights for me to explore.

It is interesting to me that what one perceives from scripture is significantly colored by one's frame. I respect those who approach scripture with a narrow frame, but as for me, I enjoy striving to perceive the spaciousness. I can go to scripture and find what I want to perceive, and I can go to scripture to be transformed by the infinite glory of our boundless God. I like the challenge of continually being invited to expand my love.

My hope in sharing a few snippets from my journey is to not have you believe in similar ways rather for you to be a curious explorer. My hope is that North is a safe space where all are welcome to share their unique views, where no view is judged, rejected, or seen as inferior. My hope is that in sharing our stories we can discover a more complete perception of God. I perceive God as spacious.

I certainly do not have the answers, or an anywhere near complete understanding of God, so I will continue to ask questions and be a curious explorer of more than the human made interstate, an explorer of the side roads, faint paths, and areas where no one has traveled. I hope the sermons I share encourage you to do the same and give you the freedom to believe however you are inspired. The more I explore I discover my experiences of God are a mere spec of the great abundance of God's diverse majesty. The more I am open to perceive God, I realize how narrow, restrictive, and incomplete are my beliefs about God. I am excited to keep journeying for I perceive that for eternity I will continually discover new facets of God and God's grace, peace, joy, and love.

"A blessing "by Kayla Craig: "It is okay if your journey has not looked like you thought it would. As you navigate twists and turns, stay curious and open to where God might be leading. May you find the courage to explore new routes and the wisdom to follow the One who will never leave or forsake you. May each new path be a chance to trust God and discover deeper truths about the love that will never let you go. Amen