

“Quest – The Reflection”

August 22, 2021

Quest: Travel as a Spiritual Act series

I’ve never been very good at journaling - or at least never good at sticking with it for long. I start at the beginning of a new year, and it lasts for about ten days, and by January 11, I’m done. There are seasons of time when I’ve done pretty well, and I always try to take notes when we travel - what we did during the day. As it is for many people, photos become the way we remember and reflect.

And reflection is important. As we’re talking about travel as a spiritual act, I’ve realized that those times when I’ve been out of my comfort zone are fruitful times to understand who I am - and see myself as a part of something bigger - a wider world.

I didn’t realize that my childhood home was anything very different from others until my kindergarten class came to visit on a field trip. They came to see a dairy farm. I took for granted that I had farm animals around me all of the time. Some kids in my class had never been to a working farm to see how you milk a cow. For one of them who stepped in a cow manure, I’m sure it was an unforgettable experience!

I also understand that I’ve experienced the blessing of travel. I’ve been to Mexico - both as a student studying Spanish language and culture and on a mission trip with a youth group. Both trips expanded my view of education and economics. There were uncomfortable moments, but those moments offered an opportunity to expand my thinking and understand another culture better.

It also forced me to put my faith up against what I was seeing, especially when it came to people struggling to survive while I was complaining about no hot water in the shower. There were moments when I was convicted. I appreciate my parents’ encouragement and support to go outside of my small town and see more of the world. It has been both unsettling and vitally important.

Our family took a trip to England, Scotland, and Wales when I was in college – the first time my dad had traveled outside of the country and the only time our family traveled all together. We spent time with friends and met new people. One memory from that trip is a man from Thailand asking my dad if he could take his picture while my dad was just sitting on a bench. We’re still not sure why he asked – maybe my dad ended up on a billboard somewhere - but it was a moment of two people coming together across cultures.

Many of you know that my husband, Ivan, grew up in Croatia, so we’ve

traveled there numerous times to see family and learn more about Ivan's heritage. Those trips have helped me to understand Ivan better. I'm always amazed at conversations with others - and the realization that no matter where we are, people have the same hopes and dreams for themselves and their loved ones - peace, safety, the best for our children, fulfilling work, and life-giving relationships.

Travel offers me perspective - whether outside of the U.S. or to another region of the country or a nearby community. We can and should be grateful for our country. We should be patriotic. But we also must see ourselves beyond just our country. We are called to be global citizens - and we're also citizens of heaven. So anytime we see ourselves as the center of it all, we need a reality check. Perhaps we can consider how we can respond to the blessings in our lives.

We can also give thanks for the lessons that we learn from others. I've noticed how people around the world are more content with what they have - and not as worried about getting more or having more. Those of us who are wealthy in comparison to the millions who live on \$5.00 a day (the cost of a coffee) often have a mindset of scarcity: *There's not enough. I have to hoard what I have so I have enough.* And the opposite is true many times - that people who are not wealthy live with a spirit of abundance. They are grateful and willing to share with others.

Along with that goes a lesson about the importance of community - helping others without any thought of being "paid back" or "keeping score." For many of us, that's a difficult lesson, even though it's rooted in Jesus' teaching.

I received a note from someone a few weeks ago inviting me to remember so many people who have *had* to travel because they answered the call to military service - both as draftees and as volunteers - many of them going across the world to places they never would've gone otherwise. The reflection shared focused on the difficulty of being exposed to ideas that were so different from the person's upbringing - a "rude awaking to the world out there." Their reflection was one of thanksgiving for the Christian faith foundation laid at home - and the blessing for having never been in combat, but being thankful for safety in situations that could have turned out very differently.

So that reflection is a great tie-in to a question for us today:

SHOW SLIDE: *Can you recall an experience that reminded you that not everyone lives with the same values, expectations, and opportunities? How did that make you feel?*

We're talking about travel as a spiritual act - whether it's across the street or across the world.

So, I want to say again that as we focus on travel, we know it's not always a choice. Remembering so many who have served our country reminds us that we're

called to care for them. Looking at the images of people fleeing Afghanistan or standing in the rubble of buildings in Haiti should move us to consider what it means to be citizens of a global community and share a common humanity.

And the words from Scripture are important to hear - for us and for our world. The prophet Isaiah's words offer hope to people who have returned from exile - coming home to a place they may not recognize. John the Seer, who wrote the Book of Revelation in the late first century, hundreds of years after Isaiah was written, offers hope to people who are seeking to remain faithful to Christ in the midst of persecution. So, for both Isaiah and John the Seer, it's a call to cling to hope in troubled times, especially for people who have been alienated and oppressed.

Both offer this global vision in which God creates something new. Present suffering and division gives way to peace and abundance. As we consider the reflection of our travels – near or far away, both the joyful and struggle-filled parts, it's important to acknowledge both the beauty and the suffering that are so very real. It can make us feel unsettled, but it's also a way for God to work in us and help us see God's vision more clearly.

For many of us, dealing with the complexities of our world is hard. We want clarity, but it's not always there. We want there to be a "right" and "wrong" way, but it's not always so. Dealing with the truth that it's not just about "me" is difficult. *I thought I was the center!*

When our perspectives are broadened, when we're made more aware of struggles for others, when we take time to consider our place in the world, and when we come to terms with complexity or at least when we're willing to face, we can feel helplessness. And the world can feel chaotic. I felt that this week as I prayed for how to respond to the needs of the world - some of which I can't even fathom. As I was excited going around Muskegon for Ana's senior pictures on Monday night, I was bothered by the reality that people across the world are worried about access to education, especially for women and girls. I was aware that thousands are dead in Haiti as the threat of other storms loom. We have to face the complexity – and even live in the discomfort.

The message of Isaiah and Revelation are something to cling to and claim in times like this: God is present, God is with us, God is doing a new thing continually, God is making a way where there seems to be no way.

That's God's work, but it's also our work. We are followers of Jesus - God Incarnate - God with skin on - who continued to break barriers and reach out to people with hope, grace, and salvation. We follow him. We do good where we can.

We've been encouraged and challenged to think about how travel changes and

transforms us. I invite you watch a short clip where travel guide Rick Steves talks about “The Challenge of Travel.” **SHOW MEDIA**

I appreciate Steves’ reminder that fear can stifle compassion, but our encounters with others can help us be more passionate about our world and be more compassionate - to actually “suffer with” others and reach out with care.

And the challenge is there - that getting away from what’s familiar can upset our accepted norms and help us gain some perspective. We’re not the center of the universe, and our view may be limited. Even when it comes to living our faith, remembering where Jesus grew up, lived, and served isn’t the same as our context.

This week I was especially grateful UMCOR and agencies like them who are on the ground and who will stay to alleviate suffering. We have the opportunity to be partners with them - to give out of our abundance and support missionaries who are doing incredible work around the world.

It’s a reminder to us that when we see each other as a “global family” and live without so much fear of one another, we can do much more, which benefits all of us because we share those same hopes - health, stability, peace. Rather than allowing fear and hesitation to deplete our energy, how can we be more open to God’s leading?

How is God calling us, even in those moments when reflecting is uncomfortable, when we’re convicted and challenged? How is God calling us to claim God’s vision for our world – hope, peace, salvation, wholeness? That’s what reflection can do for us. It’s important to face the challenge – what it teaches us and calls us to deeper faith and trust in God who loves the world.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.