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# Wandering and Lamaze (Preface and Chapter 1 of The Dusty Ones: Why Wandering Deepens Your Faith)

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# THE DUSTY ONES

WHY WANDERING  
DEEPENS YOUR FAITH

A. J. SWOBODA



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For Mom.  
When possible,  
send the gazpacho recipe.  
It's to die for.  
With love,  
Your son

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# PREFACE

There is a story passed down about the Amish and the quilts they make. The Amish—a people who have over the centuries honed and mastered the art of quilt making—have a knack for creating by hand the most elaborate, intricate, beautiful, and seemingly perfect quilts one could possibly imagine. But one finds a surprise with each work of art. Although the quilts have an appearance of perfection to the glancing eye, the Amish intentionally do something unique to their quilts that even a machine would never think to do. That is, somewhere, if one examines long enough, a keen observer will find *one* blatant mistake hidden in the piece of art—a bad stitch, an off color, a loose end. Whatever the mistake may be, don't be confused: that mistake is intentional. The mistake is because of God. Whenever the Amish make a quilt, they always leave one mistake in the otherwise perfect work. The reason is simple: *only God is allowed to be perfect.*

In what's to come, I have a certain person in mind. E. B. White once said that a writer is fueled mostly by their “childish belief that everything he thinks about, everything that happens to him, is of general interest.”<sup>1</sup> Writing is an arrogant business fueled by a class of people who assume we all care what they have to say. I admit my arrogance. In my own hubris, I guess, I've come to believe there are a few out there

who need to hear what I have to say about wandering. I don't write because I've somehow arrived or have attained perfection. Rather, I write because wandering toward God is done better with others.

This book is written *by* a wanderer *for* wanderers. To be sure, a book about Christian wandering isn't a book for everyone, particularly for people who think they've already managed to iron out every little wrinkle in their picture-perfect faith. I'm aware there remain religious folk who see such a state of perfection as their current state of being. I don't share in that kind of arrogance. Candidly, those who assume they've already arrived at the shores of glory should return this book—it will disappoint them greatly. Get a refund. It will do you no good. Because the intended audience of this book remains quite specific indeed: people who still have some major ironing to do.

By stating this at the onset, I'm admitting that this book isn't a book for just *anyone*. As I survey the scene, there remain countless kinds of audiences that a writer like myself may feel at liberty to address: I could speak to libertarians, or mothers, or people with glaucoma. And certainly each of these audiences will bring to their reading a unique set of questions and sensibilities and experiences that must be attended to. I once read of a Christian missionary who, showing up by horseback to a town, would first visit the local library. There, he would look around to see what books the locals had been checking out. He knew he could bring answers *only* if he knew the townspeople's questions. That's the writer's task, as tedious as it may be. For writers with their wits about them learn early on to anticipate such questions, sensibilities, and experiences in the formation of their writing. Writers mustn't solely busy themselves with what they themselves bring to the book; rather, they must give surplus attention to what the *readers* bring to the book. Writers must learn how to read their audience before they can offer them a single word.

In what follows, I've attempted to do just that. In short, an author, when she or he sets out to write, does best to pay keen attention to identifying the very particular person. Certainly, a good many overly ambitious writers hamstring themselves at the onset by writing a book

to some vague, generalized audience in their minds—a book for *anyone* and *everyone* and *all* in between. Still, I have yet to find that to be an advantageous means of getting ideas across. And this doesn't even begin to account for the fact that few (if any) writers have in their bones a message that everyone wants, or needs, to hear. I have in mind that specific person who deeply desires to know God and embody the ways of Jesus, and who passionately seeks to breathe the life of God's Spirit but finds themselves losing their way from time to time. If that's you, let's be friends for the next few chapters. Let's wander together.

I write with the wanderer in mind. Why? I *was* a wanderer. I *am* a wanderer. Until glory, I *will continue being* a wanderer. I'm still pressing on. Perhaps you are in the same boat. George Bernard Shaw once joked that the statistics on death were staggering—one hundred out of one hundred will die. I think there is ample evidence to suggest that the same statistics are at work among people and their wandering along the geography of faith. If we aren't wandering now, we will be soon; if we are wandering now, we probably will be tomorrow as well. And to our surprise, the Bible, a book for wanderers, anticipates all the questions we may bring to it.

The Bible has the most general audience in mind ever: *everyone, of every time, everywhere*. That's ambitious, isn't it? Unlike any merely human literary invention, the Bible is the only book in history, I'd argue, that actually addresses the exact needs of its readers with perfect clarity across time, space, and culture. For in all history, no book has had the ability to speak to as many audiences in as many times and places as the Bible. An admission: I've got little if anything by way of experience or advice to address the libertarian, or mother, or person with glaucoma, let alone the subniche market of libertarian mothers with glaucoma. But the Bible speaks to them all. Why? Because *all* wander.

The Bible is a book for wanderers who are willing to acknowledge that they wander. While I think everyone wanders, only the brave are willing to admit it. The Bible is a wanderer's textbook—it is filled with them, and it always has them in mind. My hope is that this book will illuminate that for my reader. The truth remains that the way of



Jesus, the pursuit of God, and the life of God's Spirit are far more often a bumpy dirt road than a paved highway. Discipleship is dusty. This is, one would think, why we find that the earliest Christians self-identified as "the way," not "the arrived." Over the bumps and through the woods—and there will be lots of them—they journeyed toward God and his kingdom through the pain and death and persecution it would awaken. As God would have it, it is even in the getting lost that happens from time to time that one learns something beautiful and true and good. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, good news for the lot of us. I once read that the late novelist Walker Percy had said that the most important difference between people is between those for whom life is a quest and those for whom it is not.<sup>2</sup> This is for the *quester*, the *seeker*, the *sojourner*, and the *wanderer*; basically, anyone still doing the *er*—those along "the way." You are just the wanderer God has always had in mind.

And all those "mistakes" on the quilt of our lives are really just part of the fabric of God's grace and perfection.

Remember, wanderer: only God is allowed to be perfect.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to my loving mother, Robyn Lee Wilkerson. As a new parent, I am slowly beginning to wrap my head around why it was that you always wept at my off-key choir recitals, came and watched my plays multiple times during their two-week runs, and put even my worst artistic creations on our fridge with great pride. I get it now. Also, I'm beginning to comprehend the nuanced difficulties of parental life. Thank you for the love you showered upon me—despite the difficulties you faced, and even when I never saw or thanked you for it. I will eternally be proud to call myself your son.

My wife, Quinn, read this manuscript. More than that, she breathed a life into it no one else could. I love you, Swoboda. Also, my four-year-old boy Elliot perpetually asked to wrestle with me throughout the writing of this text as I sat at the wooden table in our living room. Although he's never won any of our matches, I can foresee the day when he will. Take it easy, boy, I'm becoming a fragile old man.

My church, Theophilus, gave me a pulpit, time, and space to write and iron these ideas out, all without firing me. Thanks for that. I hope and pray that these words bring hope and life to you as we learn to wander together the dusty road of discipleship with Jesus.

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I also wish to acknowledge the voices of the saints who have wandered before me. Every year I read the writings of one of these saints. This year, I poured myself into the writings of St. Augustine of the fourth century. Augustine, I read everything you wrote and kept finding myself struggling through the same things you did. It feels like we are friends now. I wish you wrote more, even though some of your stuff got kind of weird. I guess I'll have time to ask you about those things later on.

Father, Son, Spirit—you are the death of my death. I am hidden in you. And all the glory is yours.

# 1

## WANDERING AND LAMAZE

This is what the LORD says about this people: “They greatly love to wander.”

Jeremiah 14:10

This book is about *wandering*.

It wouldn't be fair to say I make my final approach to the topic of wandering out of nowhere or free of baggage. I've checked some heavy bags for the flight. Indeed, I bring myself with a cargo load of luggage from my own story that's sure to affect the way I reflect upon it. For one, I approach the topic of wandering as a preacher. Preaching is my trade, my vocation, and my life's passion. Preaching is also my paycheck—it puts food on my family's table. But my preaching isn't entirely driven by economic forces alone. I preach because I am a Christian. And as a Christian who has done a considerable amount of wandering, I can't shut up about the topic. Standing there week after week in front of the people of God with an open Bible, I've come to

observe that every follower of Jesus does a good deal of wandering from Sunday to Sunday.

Preaching is a powerful yet mysterious act akin—in the ancient words of Jeremiah the prophet—to having fire in the bones (Jer. 20:9). Preaching is what I do even if at times I don't fully comprehend it. "I don't understand preaching," once quipped the famed preacher Ian Pitt Watson, "but I believe in it deeply."<sup>1</sup> The same goes for wandering: I don't get it, but I really believe in it. As a preacher, I preach the centrality of wandering as the pathway to Christian maturity. There is simply no alternate route. Yet while this sacred act of preaching is itself powerful beyond all imagination, the one who undertakes it is bound to be a broken vessel just like all the ancients were. Every one of God's honest preachers has a limp. We can't trust the ones who claim total perfection.

Candid or not about this fact in the public arena, a preacher wanders like the rest of us behind that safe, thick, hardened, wooden fortress we call a pulpit. Note: *pulpit* comes from the Latin word *pulpitum*, a "stage." The contemporary church has done a masterful job of treating the pulpit as just that: a stage where we preachers put on our act, donning masks of piety that cover over our real, true selves. But Jesus didn't come that we'd cake over reality with a good performance, did he? Is God's kingdom a kingdom of actors? I don't believe so. Over the years, I've come to appreciate preachers who are up front about their own brokenness, imperfections, and foibles; I've also tried to emulate them as well as possible. I suppose you could say my preaching palate has changed. In times past, I was drawn nearest to those preachers who presented every matter of faith as a series of either/or options—black *or* white, in *or* out, this *or* that. I was enamored with sermons that drew lines in the sand of reality. After years of subsequent reflection, I've come to believe it was the "*or*" I lusted for. Everything just feels safer and more concise when you live under the *or*. The *or* makes things more straightforward and clear-cut, almost surgical. I would have said I liked preachers who offered nothing but black-and-white certainty—particularly, certainty

about their own clarities and perfections and opinions on every matter under the religious sun.

Not so much anymore. I've come to believe that truth—at least truth in the Christian sense—is far more complex than a series of either/or options drawn from the perfect life of a pristine preacher. Truth, in Christianity, has wrinkles. I am the first to admit this may arouse uncomfortable reactions within many of us, but it is the very basis of historic Christianity. At the moment Jesus declared that he was “the way and the truth and the life” (John 14:6), he was refusing to offer the same old, tired evaluation on the nature of truth popular in the minds of his contemporaries. Rather, Jesus was offering a fresh, novel way of understanding truth that nobody had considered up to that point. Truth, for Jesus, wasn't something “out there” written in the stars or drawn from the philosophers or revealed from the observation of rolled dice or chicken entrails or clear crystal balls. He—Jesus, the God-man—was *himself* truth. Truth was a person, a person just like you and me. Jesus lived a real human life through and through. Yet before being nailed to the wood of the cross, Jesus's skin would be daily pierced by the tiny slivers common to a carpenter. Jesus, this truth, would have had the wrinkles of a first-century Jewish peasant carpenter who worked rough wood under the sun day in and day out. *He* was truth. Such a way of thinking about truth must not be abandoned for the Christian. For it remains a dangerous temptation to misconceive truth as a series of propositions or statements or ideas trapped in the air-tight coffin of human words. Rather, truth is Jesus Christ—God in human flesh who walked around and had wrinkles. Jesus Christ walked, and talked, and ate, and drank, and burped. He was Emmanuel—God *with* us.

This wrinkly truth, Jesus Christ himself, is the sole content of a preacher. A preacher isn't to be a peddler of opinions, a purveyor of politics, or a door-to-door salesman of religion. A preacher, above all, is tasked with bearing the fact of Christ's *euangelion*, good news, salvation—what we call the gospel, which is the end of opinion, politics, and religion. Indeed, preaching is the crucifixion of *all* opinion and

novelty on the cross of Jesus. Nor is a preacher a preacher of theology, something we've more often than not come to abuse as a kind of philosophical zoo to cage the wildness of the Creator. No. The highest calling of a preacher is not primarily to lay forth this doctrinal opinion *or* that doctrinal opinion, this denomination *or* that denomination, this view of the end times *or* that view of the end times. The preacher's task is instead the bold proclamation that each of our lives is being built upon either Christ *or* anything else. There's no middle ground. Rock *or* sand, Jesus said—there are no other foundations upon which to build.

The most effective pulpits aren't sturdy wood; they are broken people. The most effective pulpit is the wobbly, unsturdy, wandering life of a saved sinner who has denied and been welcomed back three times like the apostle Peter. Preaching Jesus is best done from behind the pulpit of our wandering, broken lives. The most succinct definition of preaching I've come across is that preaching is "truth mediated through personality."<sup>2</sup> What this suggests is that preaching Jesus Christ must be done through the *actual* life, story, struggles, wanderings, and personality of the preacher who proclaims him. I agree wholeheartedly. Amen and amen. The preacher will soon find that the best platform from which to preach this gospel is an authentic life of a real person who is struggling to live it out. Anything else just won't do.

Still, more often than not, we don't actually allow preachers the space or freedom to teach from the textbook of their wandering experiences. We demand preachers, sadly, to be perfected celebrities above all else. The pressures we've put on the backs of people who help lead us in our faith have reached ludicrous proportions. We expect preachers to be saviors, not servants; lawyers, not witnesses; CEOs, not shepherds. And it's because we want celebrities, not real broken servants. Celebrities bring in the cash. And so pastors have become celebrities, by and large, trading in their holy role of being "a guide on the side" to serving as "a sage on the stage." We've *idolized* them. Don't misread me, please. Celebrity Christianity is *everybody's* fault, not just that of a few. It's as much our fault for propping someone up as it is theirs for allowing it to happen.

To protect our idolized expectations of the celebrity pastor, we give them only so much space to speak about their wandering experiences. As I recently toured our nation's churches and universities sharing my own story of a struggle with alcohol that I had recounted in my book *A Glorious Dark*, I found time and again people caught off guard that my struggle came to a head just three and a half years ago. They couldn't seem to believe it. People couldn't conceive of it—it happened such a short time ago *while* I was a pastor, *while* I taught at their seminary, *while* I was writing books on Christian faith. This is a sign of the problem at hand—it is like we are permitted to struggle and wander in our faith so long as it happened decades ago. But if it happened just three short years ago, or last year, or last week, well, that's just inappropriate. We've created a church culture where we are permitted to struggle and wander in the far distant past but not in the dangerous present. It's our statute of limitations on wandering; it is acceptable as long as it happened a long time ago.

In short, we ordain only the safe parts of our preachers. The dangerous parts—their struggles, wanderings, doubts, and sin—we kindly ask them to leave in the parking lot. And, in turn, we do this to each other. Why? Because we're addicted to certainty, not faith. It shouldn't be surprising that pastors are burning out, walking away from ministry, or leaving faith altogether. We've systematically replaced Jesus Christ with certainty machines—a class of preachers expected to be perfect. The pressure of the world has been put on them by the church to be perfect and assertive, and by golly, to never ever wander. Those in my trade have become certainty machines, pumping out a steady stream of safe truths meeting the emerging market of consumer Christians who yearn for cliché more than Christ. And pastors are leaving because of it. Most pastors don't leave the ministry because they're rejecting God; they leave the ministry so they can find God again. I no longer believe being a certainty machine is preaching in the primal, or biblical, sense. You can only preach as you are. Preaching is “truth mediated through personality”—the life of Jesus as told through someone's *actual* and *real* efforts at following him. We must relearn to discuss Jesus as



we are actually experiencing him, not as we would ideally like to be experiencing him if we were perfect and never wandered.

Again, the world has only seen one Preacher who could boast of perfection. Light shines best through cracks. For that matter, cracks are the only way light can actually get through. Indeed, the truth of Jesus shines brightest through something that's broken. Following Jesus is hard for the simple fact that Jesus is wild, not caged. Jesus, one finds, isn't tame. He isn't docile. God is feral, wild. This wildness of truth can't be trapped in words or phrases or idioms; truth is the very wild God in Jesus. Yes, words can convey and convince and help bring people to the truth in the way a train can get us somewhere. But a train shouldn't be confused with a destination. Or you might think of it this way: if it fits in a spoon, it can't be the ocean. God can't be contained by the boxes of our words, ideas, or theologies. Truth goes beyond all that stuff. God's bigness is always bigger than our spoons.

In the words of Norm from the movie *Jaws*, truth, like a shark, always necessitates “a bigger boat.”

A god completely understood isn't God at all. This is why so many people are increasingly dissatisfied with the preaching they find in churches today. We will never be satisfied by safe truths being ladled into our broken hearts through “flawless” preachers. The last thing we need is safe truth through safe people. We need the wild, dangerous truth of Jesus, which is wild and dangerous through the shattered lives of saved sinners. Preaching involves a preacher drowning in the furious grace of God and inviting a bunch of people to watch. Preaching shouldn't always fit in the spoon of the American mind; it must embody the full-bodied idea that truth is always bigger than the sermon itself. I'm a connoisseur of what I call “rough preaching,” that is, preaching that tells it as it is. I've learned the most about following Jesus from those with the greatest failures. Perhaps the greatest commentary any of us has for preaching the good news is our own textbook of mistakes, which helps us exegete our own failures that quietly whisper the eternal mysteries of grace. Maybe the

best preaching advice I've ever received is this: if we preach to the perfect, nobody will listen; if we preach to the imperfect, we won't be able to keep folks away.

Again, years ago it would have been different. I would have told you that I liked everything to be straight and ironed out during Sunday's sermon. But things have changed, and not because I'm opposed to eloquence, or allergic to explanation, or don't believe in absolute truth. On the contrary—I believe in clarity and explanation and truth with the best of them. I just happen to think that a wrinkle in a sermon is a preacher's most eloquent way to actually hold high the beautiful truth about Jesus Christ. We can preach about one of two things: Jesus or anything else. Our witness should always say, "Hey, Jesus is the way. *Really*. But let me assure you: this preacher of Jesus has got quite a ways to go. Jesus is the way. I'm not."

One might conclude this is precisely why Paul wrote that we preach "not ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:5). It strikes me that preaching self seems to have been a temptation in the early church. To lie to the world from our stage and say we've arrived in our faith is to preach *ourselves* and not Jesus. For any of us to stand up and pontificate—wrinkle- and wandering-free—that we don't continue to wander on our way toward Jesus is to lie. We all wander. We all know we wander. But to stand up and hold ourselves up as having arrived is, in the end, to preach the wrong savior. When our message about Jesus comes off *too* slick or too much about ourselves, it's more about the preacher than anything else. When I am the hero in every story I tell, I am most certainly proclaiming a false gospel. If people see me more than Jesus, I need to get off the stage.

That's why I like preachers who talk about their wandering—they become the palate for the beauty of God's love. They're honest. They don't have to make things up. This is what you get—me and my silly life drowning in the grace and mercy and love of Jesus Christ. And I guess this is as good a time as any to say it: the best preachers wander, stumble, and scratch their way through the life of faith like the rest of us but keep going. They aren't any different. Only the best preachers

are willing to talk about it. True preaching isn't reality modification. False preaching sweeps reality under the rug of the "sermon."

Love the preachers who talk about their sin. Be skeptical of everyone else.



St. Paul the preacher was the first to publicly confess in his own writings to other Christians of his sin and struggle in his ongoing journey to follow Jesus. In so doing, Paul sought to illustrate the contours of his own spiritual weakness with such vivid conviction and passion and repetition that one is left wondering if perhaps he is actually inviting us to model the same. For example, we find in 1 Timothy 1:15 Paul giving himself the title "the chief of sinners." In Ephesians 3:8, Paul refers to himself as "less than the least of all the Lord's people." He doesn't end there—the language with which he opts to discuss his own internal strife and struggle regarding his flesh's love for sin in Romans 7 leaves the reader clearly aware that this was a man who experienced internal anguish and toil.

Paul was aware he hadn't yet arrived. His brilliance lies in the fact that he never tries to fake it. "I press on toward the goal," Paul writes to the church in Philippi (Phil. 3:14). Paul's words here—most likely written as he was strapped by the ankles to a burly Roman guard while under arrest for treason against the Roman state—are reflective of a unique attitude toward the Christian life that one might find surprising from its apostle par excellence. Paul wrote of pressing on from within a prison cell where he awaited trial for his subversive crimes against the Roman state. What would lead him to pen such words? It seems almost silly to consider that someone could "press on" toward anything as they sit in a prison cell, doesn't it? But Paul, ironically, was apparently advancing even though he was chained to a burly soldier. There's nowhere to go while in prison, is there? How can someone "press on" when they're so stuck in life?

One can tell Paul never "preached himself." Rather, Paul preached Jesus from the dank prison cell of his own life. Yet, in so doing, he

relentlessly talked about hope and joy and grace as though he wasn't disturbed by his plight. I've often wondered if he was simply out of touch with his dire situation. I appreciate Rodney Reeves's words about this hope in his book *Spirituality according to Paul*, in which he discusses Paul's optimism in such toilsome situations. Reeves writes that either Paul had something otherworldly going on in his heart that could allow him to be this free and optimistic and hopeful in a prison cell, or, frankly, Paul was in complete denial.<sup>3</sup> Which is often how hope comes across—it can easily be interpreted as denial. Hope isn't denial; hope is taking in your real-life situation and finding God smack-dab in the midst of it. Hope is not denying reality. Paul wasn't in denial. Paul had hope that in his wandering, he would someday arrive. He could “press on” in a prison cell because a physical wall was no match for his gospel freedom. The prisoner Paul knew that his journey was not really a physical one, such as going from one city to another or from a room downstairs to a room upstairs. Paul “pressed on” not physically but spiritually.

What's similarly striking is Paul's incessant humility. Paul was pressing on to take hold of Jesus Christ within a prison cell he believed couldn't hinder him. Paul seems aptly prepared to admit that he hadn't arrived yet, that he had quite a way to go. “Not that . . . I have already arrived at my goal,” writes Paul, “but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Phil. 3:12). As has been discovered by countless of the faithful who have gone before us, Christian maturity isn't ever ironed out this side of heaven. This is not to discount the many brave souls who have striven for arrival, of course, an attempt that should be applauded. But to claim it has happened is nothing short of hubris. Perfection, for the Christian, comes at death and no sooner.

Paul humbly admitted he still had a long way to go. This kind of humility should be part of the Christ follower's comprehensive outlook on life. That Christians derive their outlook on their life not primarily from science, Hollywood, or politics but from an executed carpenter should make for great humility. And, like Paul, Christians understand that their journey isn't merely physical; rather, it is a journey toward the

all-encompassing love in Jesus Christ that can take place while being strapped to a Roman soldier. We haven't arrived at our destination yet. In our own journeys, we should seek to embody the same "press on" attitude of Paul in his dank prison cell.

Truth be told, the best growing and maturing one will ever experience will most likely take place in contexts that are very similar to prison cells. A Christian grows most where they are stuck. A family can be our prison cell. Work can be our chains. Having children can be holding us down. Our prison cells are different, but we all have them. And it is the wrong way of thinking about things to assume we can only experience breakthrough or growth when we can escape those things. Quite the opposite: Paul spoke, ironically, of being free in a prison. It turns out that freedom in Christ does not necessarily include freedom spatially, or relationally, or vocationally. More often than not, we will blossom most in those stuck places we'd never want to be or dreamed we'd be in in the first place. This process will require first and foremost that we cease trying to escape our prisonish environments for better lands where we think real growth can happen. Maturity can only happen right here, right now. Christian growth has never been dependent upon ideal environments or perfect conditions. Prison cells have always done the trick. And so, like Paul, we must learn to embrace following Jesus precisely where we are. Nowhere else will do. We will never be able to follow Jesus anywhere else other than here and now.

I guess what I'm saying is that there is no "somewhere else" in God's kingdom. That the kingdom is "at hand" means it is right here, right now.

Christian spirituality is a slow train that must inevitably stop at every little Podunk town in our life—nothing can be skipped over. Our efforts to learn to love and follow Jesus must meander through wherever we are as we wander our way through life. "Not all those who wander are lost," wrote Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*. Tolkien, brilliant literary genius that he was, certainly knew that wandering and lostness aren't exactly the same thing. One can wander and be right on track, just as being in the desert doesn't necessarily mean we are deserted. Wandering and discipleship go hand in hand for the Christian. Keep in mind

that Paul preached and wrote and ministered as one who claimed to have not yet arrived. That should say something to us. Paul spoke openly of his sin, struggles, and lack of ministerial success—he was a prototype wandering preacher who embraced the wrinkles of his own life as a platform for the truth of the good news. And he was the apostle who brought the gospel message to the gentile people. Not bad, when you think about it. If Paul still pressed on in his wanderings, then we probably need to as well.

We press on down the bumpy path, as it were, along the roughest of terrains. This path is straight but never smooth. This may be sad news for any of us who were duped into following an easy Jesus who bears an easy kingdom. Jesus clearly left the hard stuff about the kingdom of God in place—he asked people to abandon possessions, leave families, and give of themselves with wild abandon. His kingdom wasn't easy.<sup>4</sup> The Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama once wrote that Americans love the cross; or, rather, they love the cross so long as it's conveniently handed to them in the size of a lunch pail and comes equipped with an easy-grip handle.<sup>5</sup> Christ's kingdom wasn't convenient. I guess those easy-grip, convenient preacher types have the right to make the cross comfy, but the kind that rings true is the kind that comes with all the slivers it would have originally had. One knows truth has been discovered when it hurts but leaves you wanting more. The road of truth is painful but worthwhile. It is always bumpy but always worth it.

Like John the Baptist, I wish to “make straight paths” (Matt. 3:3). But there's a big difference between straight and smooth. The path is straight, indeed, but it is almost never smooth.



Wandering, like the truth, can't be fully explained. It can only be experienced. Wandering is, as I like to say, a sermon without an explanation. I can talk about it from the pulpit all Sunday long until I am blue in the face. But you have to do it to really get it. Don't misread what I am saying. It's not a sermon without a *point*. Rather, it's a sermon without an *explanation*. The best points of truth are often best unexplained,

and an explanation can deter from that point. It's kind of like the book of Job. I've read the book countless times. Job, in his suffering, has friends telling him *why* he is suffering. And, as I read it, the point of Job is simple: when encountering someone suffering, silence is golden. In terms of suffering, explanation can't replace experience.

There's a subtle danger in writing about wandering like I'm giving a lecture or something. Because talking about the wandering that comes with faith is a lot like taking a Lamaze class. You can talk about how to deliver a child, but every mother who has given birth would be hesitant to say that a class is adequate preparation for the actual birth process. Lamaze and having a child are not the same thing. And neither are talking about the terrain of faith and walking the terrain of faith the same. Along that path, Christians will wander. No one else can do it for them. There are no surrogates. And there certainly are no anesthesiologists to make it more comfortable. One must walk the painful wandering road themselves. We each must "press on" over the painful terrain of the Christian walk.

As the saying goes, the map is not the territory. Having a map and walking the terrain are very different experiences. All of faith is like that. The same goes for suffering. I can go on and on about the experience of suffering and pain. But *why* God lets it happen so much, I've got no answer. I can't tell you why we wander, but I can tell you it's unshakably important. You can try to walk around it. I've seen people fake it and make it look like they aren't wandering. But they are wandering, and we can't avoid it, and all the while we have no explanation for the *why* of it all. Wandering is a mystery—a beautiful mystery. And while mysteries might not always make sense, you can't live life without them.

Mystery is the fresh air that keeps the faithful alive.



A cursory reading of the Bible reveals wandering on just about every page.

The sacred writings of Scripture are a wanderer's handbook, of sorts—an honest and loving friend for the wandering journey. One

biblical scholar, in a conversation with me, referred to the Bible as a “wandering text,” a term I’ve come to believe bears great weight and truth. The Bible is written for wanderers *by* wanderers. I appreciate the words of Jill Bledsoe, who captures the Bible’s ability to speak to humans in the storms of wandering. “The storms in my life,” Bledsoe writes, “have become workshops where I can practice my faith in God’s sovereignty.”<sup>6</sup> The people of Scripture weathered great storms. And we must not imagine that the Bible is a book of hollow, ethereal, dry, intellectualized information about a distant god who himself never weathered storms. The Bible does not merely offer musings on life; the Bible points to Life himself. In a time where most have bought into the lie that the key to Christian formation is information, the last thing we need is data. We need models, sponsors, and Sherpas who have walked the high ridge of faith before us. And if the Bible is the inspired Word of God for the Christian community, we can expect to have to go through what the ancients went through.

Given the amount of wandering the ancients did, wandering must not be caricatured as some extracurricular activity that only a few immature Christians do in their seasonal times of sin or disobedience. That would assume that good, churchgoing Christians never wander. Or that wandering would never happen for the person who is squarely in the will of God. But I want to suggest otherwise: wandering will be, at times, the very will of God the Father. Any caricature of this won’t do. Christian wandering isn’t extra credit; it’s often the class itself. The topsy-turvy walk of the Christian faith eventually leads through a series of peaks and valleys and wanderings on the way to the destination.

Wandering is my sweet spot, one might say. As I’ve done in the past, I could have drawn on a wide array of subjects to talk about the Christian life. Yet my own experience of wandering is the deepest well. In writing on wandering I’ve consistently found myself surprised at how snug and well fitting the topic feels. And my own familiarity with wandering gave me such a deep well to draw from that writing about it was done with a relative ease I’ve been unaccustomed to in writing. This is an anomaly for someone like myself, who, lacking a degree



in creative writing or literature, has not found the skills pertinent to good writing easy to come by. Whatever formal training I do have—in biblical studies and theology—is not known for producing excellent creative writers. Often, biblical scholars and theologians write with the creative juices akin to a bag of oats. This isn't all that bad, for a good theologian or biblical scholar isn't paid to be innovative. Christian history has a word for creative theologians: heretics.

"Creative theology" books are not the kind I often like to buy. In my humble opinion, far too many Christian writers are attempting to write *creative* theology that seeks to create new truths. But there is no *new* truth out there. Creative theology, I've long held, is an oxymoron. The task of a theologian such as myself is faithfulness to the message that has been received, not provoking ingenuity as though I bear to the world something God hasn't already gone on record about. The Christian faith, wrote Vincent of Lérins, is "what you have received, not what you have thought up; a matter not of ingenuity, but of doctrine; not of private acquisition, but of public tradition; a matter brought to you, not put forth by you, in which you must be not the author but the guardian, not the founder but the sharer, not the leader, but the follower."<sup>7</sup> God is after faithfulness, not ingenuity. Christians are like used-car salesmen—we faithfully pass on that which was not ours in the first place. We are proclaimers of Someone we never owned.

The truth is not from within ourselves; rather, it comes from without. We're not, as many in our time have come to believe they are, orthodox unto ourselves. Truth is beyond us, not from within us. The minute I'm my own basis for truth, no one can teach me a thing. And so my task here is creative writing, not creative *theology*. Even my writing isn't all that creative. As with any writer, whatever words and order of words I opt to use I've picked up from or been taught by others along the way. The turn of the phrase, the timely adjective, the terse connective sentence—none of these are unique to me. And in the same way, my message isn't mine. As a theologian, I pass on that which I have received from others, who received from others, who received from others from the deep well of Christianity. As a Christ follower, the gift

of faith was passed on to me from that ancient generation. It is not my own, nor will it ever be.

Authentic Christianity is found precisely by that person who throws all caution to the wind and chooses to borrow the life, death, resurrection, and teachings of Jesus in their entirety as a pattern and model for their own life. In that way, true Christianity is plagiarized. Christian faith isn't yours, nor can you make it your own. Faith is a gift, not a do-it-yourself project. All that one can effectively do is receive it the way a bull rider receives the straps on their beast and goes along for the ride. In receiving faith as a gift, Paul says, we are freed from any temptation to "boast" (Eph. 2:8–9). To boast is mostly to treat as a wage what has been received as a gift. A boastful follower of Jesus has become so self-referential that they believe truth can be made up, or chosen, for oneself.

To be sure, the very notion—quite popular in our time—of one seeking to "find a faith of one's own" fundamentally distinct or separate from one's parents' or the tradition of Christian history is unfounded in both the biblical narrative and Christianity. All such inventive faith is boasting. Boasting is a self-created faith. Such a faith can't be received as a gift because it came from within. Some, again, might even call such faith heresy. I don't know if I'd disagree. "For what I received I passed on to you," wrote the great St. Paul to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 15:3). Faith is a gift from first to last, not a do-it-yourself project for the morally and spiritually capable. Paul was so keenly *against* the idea of faith as ingenuity or personal creation or fitted to the personal individual that he railed against it at just about any moment he could. Whatever faith you have, he would say, is a faith that has been given to you as a gift from someone else. And a good deal of our wandering is probably owed to the fact that we are trying to re-create something that we can't re-create.

This is so freeing. For when we actually take the time to examine the lives and stories of those faithful who have gone before us, we will quickly find that those great heroes all wandered in their faith. In short, your bumbling about in faith like a drunken, lost sailor in a foreign

land is anything but new or ingenious. Our faith struggles aren't all that inventive. Others have wandered too. And, again, this is freeing, for you have a long family tree of wanderers who learned how to do it mightily and faithfully. Just like these heroes, I've wandered a lot. And I feel exceedingly confident that I am qualified to write a book about the disciplines and realities of wandering.

Those closest to me, it turns out, probably would agree. I know at least my publisher did. After proposing to the acquisitions editors a book on the disciplines of wandering, I was taken aback at their warm receptivity. Carefully reading through the confirmation they sent to me, I was particularly drawn to one line from a note the editorial board had written. It was vague but extraordinarily telling. It read, "As an editorial board, we feel this is a topic you will have a lot to say about."

With such editorial praise that I associate, perhaps unfairly, with a publisher that I'm sure just wished I'd get writing rather than talking about writing, I found myself a little wounded at first. Do people see me as a wanderer? Do I have a reputation? At any rate, while initially offended, I chose to sit in that sentence for a few moments only to find it began to feel more and more comfortable by the minute. I am a gifted wanderer! I wander with gusto! I have something to say about this topic! And I'm proud of it. I guess I have become known as a leading scholar on the topic of Christian wandering.

It's not *if* you wander. It's *how* you wander.

Still, few seem to feel as though they have the skills necessary to wander the Christian journey of life for the long haul. Let me be emphatically clear in my point here: we all wander, but few of us do it with gusto. Wandering is a lost Christian art. We are all expected to put on our good face and pretend we know what we are doing. But more often than not, we put our heads on our pillows at night knowing we've tricked the world into thinking something that is not true. Wandering isn't mere happenstance or only a result of a mistake. And the question of our reason for our wandering doesn't always have an easy answer. One might hope that the strongest predictor of why we wander would be because of our sin, but it is not. Wandering is more

complex than that. Wandering should be seen as a discipline. We *learn* how to wander with God the way we learn to love and hope and think rightly. Up to this juncture, I've written three books for a more general audience on Christian spirituality. The first, a book titled *Messy*, sought to conceptualize faith and life as an ongoing process that entails a good deal of struggle, challenge, and, as the title suggests, messes. The second, *A Glorious Dark*, included a section I called "Awkward Saturday," which considered Saturday of Holy Week. What follows, I am coming to believe, is shaping up to be a culminating book in the process.

As I began writing this book, I encountered a surprise. Few, if any, books on the topic of wandering are available to the popular market. In fact, it's worse than that. I've discovered that Christians almost feel the obligation to be dismissive of thinking through the theme of wandering out of some fear that all wandering is the result of sin or a lack of faith or a sign that they are off kilter—all assumptions, I've come to believe, that are off kilter themselves. This moratorium on the topic of wandering is unfortunate given the amount of wandering we all do on a daily basis in our attempts to follow Jesus. I find this to be a lamentable neglect in our conversations about Christian spirituality.

What I offer is this: a description of and hopeful vision for the wandering Christian experience. So much of faith wanders. This kind of experience is reflected in the words of the psalmist: "I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Ps. 23:4 KJV). The Christian walk often goes off the safe road. I want to invite you, my reader, to embrace this dangerous road of wandering so that you might find the life you most seek—life in Jesus. The church's approach toward spirituality has been riddled for years with trying to get us as far away from the wandering experience as possible. Too much of our church language, advice, and even preaching is about minimizing the amount of wandering we will do. This book doesn't do that. I intentionally sidestep age-old tricks to avoid the life of wandering. We must face it head-on. Wandering will happen whether we like it or not. Wandering is fundamental, even necessary, to the journey.

Christianity has never been nor will it ever be a movement of those who have found an easy path of walking *around* the shadow of death. Real Christianity, in its truest sense, is found in going *through* the valley of the shadow of death. There, in the dark shadows, will we find life—true and eternal life.