

I know all the words to “Ramblin’ Man” by Waylon Jennings. I bet that’s not what you expected for me to say this evening, but it’s all related. And I know the words not because I particularly enjoy country music, or because I identify with Hoss’ point of view, but it is because I was indoctrinated at a young age with a stack of cassette tapes held in an old brown weathered vinyl case whose home was the carpeted floor between the plush captain’s chairs of my Aunt Peggy & Uncle Ray’s Dodge Ram Conversion van. Raised in Kentucky, my uncle loved Tom T. Hall, Oakridge Boys, Glen Campbell, Little Richard, Ray Charles, Waylon Jennings, Willie Nelson among others I’m sure I forgot. Whenever the kids had a choice, it was always Waylon. Those songs remind me of the freedom of travel and how much I enjoyed it at a young age, spending time with my aunt, uncle, and their grandchildren, my cousins, a rag-tag assemblage of a family.

I was three years old when they blessed my mother with a chance to have some weeks in the summer alone without the expense of parenting. This was a great help to her as she was a single mother until I was 13 years old. The first summer, they crossed the Ohio River and stopped in Berea Kentucky on the way south from Dayton Ohio, just far enough to see if I as a toddler could handle being away. We stayed two nights at Aunt Ethel’s, and as I left Kentucky, I remember it was with a chilled bag of fried chicken from the night prior, including a couple triangles of hard white unsweetened cornbread. My aunt would retell the story that I fell asleep with the plastic ziplock bag of fried chicken in my hands. She dare not take it from me and place it in the cooler, thinking I’d wake up. My destiny as a traveler was set in motion. I spent 5 weeks without much incident with them in Oldsmar, Florida outside of Tampa.

With a list of other army friends across the US and an open calendar every summer was a different national park, every night another motel and hole in the wall steakhouse. In many ways I look back at my childhood summers like retirement years. I knew how to navigate using an Atlas, I regularly reviewed the Trip Tiks and considered hotels using the AAA guidebooks. I’ve used these skills in ministry with mission trips to Tijuana, Hurricane relief for Katrina, and Sandy, Appalachian work projects, Detroit inner-city summer projects, and southern Ohio home repair missions. I’m always up for an adventure. Blame it on Ray and Peggy. I know this is a lot of backstory, but these are essential characters, and if we’ll be in ministry for some time, I just want to let you know there will be stories, and if you ever want to talk travel, I’m happy to share or hear about your adventures as well.

Jesus to me, is an adventurer, and calls his disciples to the adventure he is on. I suppose that’s another way to understand why he admonishes them to “follow me” and “take up their cross”. Jesus is audacious in asking them to take nothing with them, dividing them up to go do the work he began, sending them out in pairs and groups with folks who were sick, with demons, without all the plans ironed out. He makes hillsides and lakefronts into amphitheaters. Homes and public places triage centers. Certainly the Son of God has plans, but often in the human circles where he travels there are interruptions... a man’s friends tearing a roof open to lower their friend to see Jesus, the woman who

tries to grab the hem of Jesus' garment, the woman at the well who we learned about last week at our midweek service, now the man who was born blind.

The encounter with the man born blind seems unplanned. Yes, Jesus sees him, but the first people to talk about the man is the disciples, and unfortunately as is often the case with encountering people with disabilities, the disciples talk about the man's condition, not speaking with him directly. Often the disciples are acting from their own cultural understanding, they want to understand what happened in this man's family of origin that would cause his disability. We know now that is not the case, but the cultural lens from that time.

Jesus uses the man's disability and the disciples' questioning as a chance to display the glory of God as he is healed. Demonstrating the spontaneity of this encounter, Jesus doesn't ask for water, but instead spits on the ground, using the water from his own mouth to mix with the earthen dust. In this image we have water, representing baptism, cleansing, mixing with dust of the earth, representing humanity. Remember Adam means from dust, from earth. Heaven and Earth are represented in this mud, when applied and then washed brings vision to the man. Then the neighbors add insult to injury by arguing whether the man when he received his vision was the man born blind. But in this mud, and in the man's shared action in his own healing by washing, Jesus manifests the truth, "I am the light of the world." I suppose you could say Jesus knew what this encounter would be from the beginning, but I think its more helpful to think from the perspective of the man himself, the disciples, the neighbors. This was very much spontaneous, and so much of our lives is.

And when it comes to the disability of blindness, although I do not have experience, when I was 13 and my mother did marry her first husband, he was born without the pupils of the eye, that's the hole which makes vision possible. In the 1950s as a child of a father who served in the Air Force, the military offered an experimental procedure to his family to use lasers to open holes in his eyes, giving him rudimentary pupils. This procedure, until his death gave him partial blurred vision in one eye with color, and shadows in the second, leaving him legally blind and unable to drive. His parents, seeking to avoid the social stigma associated with having a child with a disability, sought to socialize him as much as possible. He became a drummer, recreational DJ and radio host, and loved playing the keyboard hooked up to a Leslie pedal. He played in a Classic Country band. When he was very young, he liked to ride a bicycle and he always wanted a moped. A kind high school friend had him drive the golf-cart once in late adulthood. She is a woman with guts. He wanted to be, just as his parents raised him, exactly like everyone else. This was one of his deepest needs.

In his spiritual journey from the faith that shaped him as a young man, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints to later Methodism he had to wrestle with these healing stories of Jesus. If Jesus could heal that man, why can't Jesus heal me? In the end he found solace in pastoral counseling and the scripture of Isaiah 42:16.

"I will lead the blind by ways they have not known,
along unfamiliar paths I will guide them;
I will turn the darkness into light before them

and make the rough places smooth.

These are the things I will do;

I will not forsake them.” (NIV)

I found acceptance of my stepfather when I was able to set aside my expectations for who my mother would marry and recognize Jesus was speaking to me through his life and witnessing the transforming power of my mother’s love for him to change his life.

In the adventure of life—many unexpected occurrences happen, some of us could write a toe-tapping country western song about them. Much of our lives are gathered conversations along the way. We have our agenda, we set our course, but we are interrupted, surprised, we have encounters which change and challenge us. I’m not sure how change has happened in your life. Each of us has our own journeys. What I’ve realized in my 41 years of living is that it is often the case that Holy Conversations with Jesus in our lives are not always planned in advance, or prepared, but rather they just happen we come upon them like a ramblin’ men and women just on the journey.