

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
4 July 2021 – Elizabeth Bryce

Readings: Deuteronomy 26:5-8
Matthew 8: 18-27

Sermon: Wander in Wonder (Summer sermon series on Films: Nomadland)

A long time ago, in my early years in ministry, I used to go see films about once a month with some of the other United Church young adults from the town where I was working. That town in Saskatchewan, of course, was not big enough to have an actual theatre. We had to drive to the nearest small city, where there was one movie theatre that was large enough to run actual films – maybe not quite on their first run, but not so long past their prime to be called repertory. After the film, we would gather at a local restaurant to eat pizza and talk about “where was God in the film, for you?”

That movie theatre had just two rooms – which meant that you only had a choice of 2 films. Most films didn’t stay longer than a couple of weeks, so there wasn’t a lot of choice – certainly very few films had actual religious content, though I do remember seeing the film *The Mission* and *Shawshank Redemption* there, which led to great theological discussions afterwards.

But we also watched films like *Die Hard with a Vengeance*, *Wayne’s World*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Clueless*, the *Lion King* and *Toy Story* – and much to my surprise those films also led to some great theological discussions too. The question “where was God in the film, for you?” it never got tired – we could watch car chases and find God in the train that moved just in time, we could watch love stories and find God in the connection that kept partners together in spite of trial and tribulation.

So as we begin this film-based sermon series, I guess that is the question that I had in mind as I watched the film *Nomadland*, a film which won the Oscar for Best Film in the most recent Academy Awards. Where was God to be found in the story of Fern, where did I find hope in her travels, how could I relate her story to the story of Jesus, to the story of our faith?

I’ll give you a brief synopsis: The film *Nomadland* is based on a non-fiction book by the same name, written by Jessica Bruder. Bruder tracks the stories of a group of people who live like nomads, making their homes in campers and vans across the United states, always in transition, often moving to find work in another state. It’s a book about what brought them to that point in their lives, but also the community that they build wherever they go. It’s a harsh look at our economic system and the people who fall through the cracks.

Director Chloe Zhao took that book of stories and wrote the script for the film. She introduces us to Fern, a composite character who has taken to the road looking for

work, living in her van. She is also mourning the loss of her husband, her professional work life, and the home she gave up when their one-industry town went belly-up. Fern meets neighbours in the hardware store before she leaves town, and the teenage daughter asks “Are you really homeless?” Fern answers “Not homeless, no. I’m just House-less.”

So, where do I find God in this film? I find God in Fern’s understanding of home. Early on, Fern drives her van to a campground called “CamperForce” situated near an Amazon warehouse. There she joins a group of itinerant employees, hired by Amazon to fill orders in the Christmas rush. As she gets to know the other workers, one of them is showing off her body art, and points to a tattoo that says: “Home, is it just a place or is it something you carry within you?”

In Fern’s story it is clear that home is much more than a house. There are a couple of places in Fern’s story where things might have gone very differently. When her van breaks down, she is forced to visit her suburban sister and ask to borrow some money for repairs. It’s clear that her sister just wants her to settle down and live a normal life. To take the loan and put roots down somewhere. To be predictable. To have an address. But Fern moves on, and it is clear that while they love each other, the two sisters have chosen very different paths. Fern also meets a man in her travels, a man who is interested in settling down with her, to live with her in a home provided by his family. She doesn’t choose that option, either.

Because neither of those “houses” reflect the home that Fern really longs for: a home that gives her a sense of belonging, a feeling that was once rooted in her relationship with her husband, but now it needs to find a new home.

Throughout the film we see Fern connect deeply with the friends she makes along the way, but she does not feel the need to stay with them in order to love them. She also finds herself at home in the physicality of nature. She bathes naked in a river, she immerses herself in a redwood forest, she stands in the sunrise at the Grand Canyon.

Most of the actors playing roles in the film are real life itinerant campers, and they tell their stories in a way that just might make you rethink the values and pressures of a settled life.

One of them, Bob Wells, has started an association of people who have chosen not to live with the burden of mortgages and pension plans. Some of this grew out of the death of his son, an experience that radically changed his priorities. He realized he didn’t have to hang on to someone or something to love them. They will always be with you, he believes, whether they have died or just moved on to the next job.

He summed up his life’s philosophy this way: *“I never say a final goodbye, I just say: ‘I’ll see you down the road.’ When I think of my son, I know I’ll see him down the road.”*

Surely God is found in that strong sense of home, that loyal companionship, and a profound love. God reaches beyond the physical absence of a loved one, to help us

cherish the spiritual presence that emerges in its place. This is more than just remembering, it's the acceptance of an ending and the welcoming of a new beginning, its the past and the future and how they are tied together, its the history of a faith that is also bound up in the revelation of a hope to come. So it is that Fern and Bob and Linda and Swankie find their true homes on the road, even to the end of their lives.

To connect the film's story with our story of faith, the phrase that kept popping into my head is the phrase from Hebrew scripture "A wandering Aramean was my father..." It's found in Deuteronomy – taken from a speech that Moses gave at the very end of his life, after 40 years spent wandering in the wilderness, after the exodus from slavery. "A wandering Aramean..." is the basis of faith in Yahweh for Abraham and Sarah and those who would come afterwards.

As much as the people of God seem to be so deeply invested in the geography they call "the promised land", in fact their history is much more itinerant than rooted. I counted 20 major moves in the book of Genesis alone, from the moment when Adam and Eve were kicked out of the garden of Eden until Joseph is taken to the house of Potiphar in Egypt.

Abraham and Sarah probably moved the most, and it is likely Abraham who this phrase refers to. Biblical scholars suggest that it is a phrase taken from an ancient hymn, a cultic reading that is expressing a sense of belonging, and a shared story about being uprooted around which people could gather.

The name "Aram" has been found in one of the oldest examples of human writing, from the texts written in the 18th century BC. That would make it older than the Bible itself.

So the story of the people and their relationship with a God who calls them to leave home, that story IS their home, their promised land. They were always travelling with God. The promised land is not a plot of land in the Fertile Crescent, a place that has borders and fences, but it is a state of mind, of being rooted in their relationship with God wherever life takes them.

When Moses gave that speech at the end of Deuteronomy, he was instructing his people to remember this legacy. Moses instructed them that when they finally lived somewhere long enough to plant crops, they should bring the harvest as a thankoffering, because they need to know how it is they came to be planting in that place. Deeply embedded in their history, is this eternal truth: that their true home is not a country, a nation, a state, a house, it's not private property. Home is the spiritual relationship that we carry in our hearts. Like the tattoo on the itinerant Amazon worker: is it just a physical place? Or is it something you carry within you?

The people of God lived more often in exile than they did in places where they could build houses and farms. They were more often praying to God on the road, than they were worshipping God in a temple. They were constantly being uprooted and called to follow God into the wilderness.

And Jesus became a part of that legacy. From the beginning of his ministry, people tried to locate him by his physical home. “I heard he was from Nazareth.” “He was born in Bethlehem, of David’s line.” “But doesn’t he speak like a Galilean?” “Then is he a prophet only for the people of Israel?” But Jesus transcended all those definitions and explanations.

When Jesus entered the wilderness for 40 days’ temptation, he uprooted himself and became the itinerant preacher that crossed all the expected borders and boundaries.

The story from the gospel of Matthew that we heard today is the story of Jesus moving on, while some of his followers and disciples were resisting the change. “We still have things to do here, Jesus. Do we have to pack up already?” Another disciple says something like “I’m ready to follow you anywhere, man, but is there a forwarding address?”

Jesus responded: *Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Mt 8:19.* Not exactly comforting to someone who really wants to know where his next meal is coming from.

While Jesus doesn’t expect the same of everyone, it is important for us to sort out our priorities. How deeply do we want to be tied to an economy that feeds some and lets others go hungry? Can we even imagine that there are alternatives? There’s something honest about Jesus’ picture of discipleship as life on the road. Do you think (we) could handle the kind of honesty that Jesus offers about OUR priorities?

Nomadland offers us a critique of the economic structures that really only work for part of the population – and it introduces us to some people who are creating a meaningful life for themselves off the beaten path.

In the life of faith we too are invited to create something completely new in our relationship with the world, something that is not dependent on a particular house or a certain group of people. It’s a faith that continues to grow strong, and that is rooted in the Spirit, but with wings that will take us out into the world with love and compassion. Thanks be to God.