The Movement of Dislocation
Fourth Sunday of Advent, Dec. 21, 2014
First Baptist Church, KCMO

To locate something is to find something in its place, as when you locate a town on a map. To RE-locate is to make the decision to change locations. To RE-turn is to go back to an earlier location.

To mis-locate or mis-place is to put something in the wrong place, where it doesn’t belong. What is there about getting older that seems to increase the possibility of mis-placing things? To DIS-locate or dis-place is to be removed from one’s place, to lose control, to have your sense of place taken from you.

We are a people of places. Have you ever considered how you have been shaped by the places of your life? How would you be different if you were living in Brooklyn right now, or Buenos Aires, or Tuscumbia, Missouri? How would you be different if you had been raised by your family but in an utterly different place? If you were raised on a farm instead of the city, or vice versa?

I love living in the city. When we first moved back to this area, we lived in a suburb. I know many of you live in a suburb and I hope that works for you. It didn’t work for me. It was purely my mental mindset, but I wasn’t at home. It wasn’t my place. Living in south Kansas City, it feels so much more like my place, my home, where I need to be.

But my sense of place is also complicated by the fact that I grew up in a small town in the foothills of the Ozarks. I grew up among some real McCoy hillbillies, in a town that was almost exclusively blue collar. And I carry that place with me…with pride.

I remember the pain of my first two years at William Jewell College. As a small town kid from a blue collar background, I was unprepared for all the choices and changes I experienced. Many of my peers were more urban and had more affluence in their background. I experienced dislocation.

Since college, Jan and I have relocated 9 times. Relocation can be painful enough because you lose the familiar things of your life, your friends and support system, your favorite places. But relocation is nothing like dislocation. What for Jan and me was a relocation, for our children it was a dislocation. It was change in which they had little voice. And in two of our moves, it cost our children a great deal, and I regret that very much.

Dislocation can be painful. The coal mine shuts down. For generations, your family has worked in the mine. Now, everyone is losing their jobs. Folks have to move away. That is dislocation.
Your house burns to the ground. You lose your home and all your belongings. That is dislocation. You lose your job and fall behind on your rental or house payments, and you lose your home. You become homeless and that is dislocation. You have no place of security or comfort.

A war breaks out. Because of your political views, you must flee in the night. In St. Louis we began working with over 70 Burmese refugees who had fled to America due to the violence in their homeland. They were Karen and Karini Tribal people whom the government of Burma was pushing off their homelands and forcing them to live in the forests as nomads. Their own place was so different from living in an inner city in America. That was dislocation.

Theologian Robert McAfee Brown wrote, “There is a lot of pain in dislocation. I would like, on one level of my being, to stay located in one place.” (p 15) Dislocation, he writes “doesn’t necessarily involve a change in physical location. I lived 14 years on the same university campus and went through the biggest dislocation…of my life.” (Creative Location, Abingdon, 1980)

My mother still lives in the same house where we moved when I was in the 7th grade. She’s 96 years old – that’s a long time in one place. But when my father died, she went through dislocation. She didn’t want to move but it was a painful adjustment to live alone and to manage the household without dad’s partnership and to feel safe in the house alone.

Biblical scholar Richard Horsley offers fresh insight into the nativity story by describing the great social dislocations occurring in Palestine in the first century. “Peasants unable to meet the heavy demands for tithes, taxes, and tribute would be driven increasingly into debt and might eventually be displaced. A number of factors indicate that many Jewish peasants were indebted or displaced during Herod’s reign… When Herod sent raiding parties out into the countryside to commandeer provisions for the Roman troops, whole villages would have been left destitute… The troops would have created refugees, often hundreds and thousands of them at once, virtually every time they took military actions… Right about the time Jesus was born, the Romans were particularly brutal, …burning towns and enslaving inhabitants… The Roman troops would storm village after village, slaughtering and burning as they went.” Those who survived, became refugees.

Horsley argues that “we should inquire why Joseph was no longer in his ancestral home of Bethlehem… In Jewish Palestine…the majority of the peasants would have been working their ancestral lands… How did it happen that Joseph now lives 100 miles from his ‘house and family’ of origin…? Almost certainly because of some displacement… Thus Joseph and Mary represent the thousands of rootless people in ancient Palestine cut loose from their ancestral lands… Having found some means of livelihood elsewhere, people such as Joseph and Mary were then forced to return to their ‘homes’ to be enrolled for the tribute required by their conquerors.” (p. 72 The Liberation of Christmas)

Another evidence that Joseph had been displaced is that he had no immediate family waiting to receive them when they arrived in Bethlehem. Perhaps his entire clan had been driven away. He came ‘home’ to a village of strangers.
The Psalmist cries, “How long can we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (137:4)

Joseph and Mary, forced into dislocation by an oppressive empire, had to travel when Mary was near full-term from Galilee to Bethlehem. It would have been an arduous trip, and at terrible timing in their lives. Had Mary remained in Nazareth with her family, and Joseph journeyed alone, her mother and the village midwife would have been right there with her.

But my point last Sunday comes to mind here: Mary felt displaced in her own village. She first fled to Judea to be with Elizabeth and apparently did not feel comfortable being left behind. For this trip, she felt it necessary to travel with Joseph even though it wasn’t required of her.

Had Mary remained behind in Nazareth, hers would have been a private birth, in the security of her childhood home. And there is something about Jesus’ birth that is so very public, in a stable, without locked or guarded door, where complete strangers can stumble in during the night without invitation, where the stars themselves form a canopy over his birth. It’s as if Jesus’ birth isn’t private: it belongs to all of us.

Sometimes, when we are out of place, we can more easily find God’s place, the place of Emmanuel, where God dwells with us.

We may not find Emmanuel, God’s dwelling place, without some dislocation. We must stand outside our familiar, secure places. Without dislocation, we may become too comfortable to stumble into places like an open-air stable.

“In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their ancestral towns to be registered. Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. And while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to their first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in an animal manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Lk 2:1-7)