Message: Three Great Camping Stories in the Bible

One year ago this month, our family was making final preparations to go on a two-week cross-country camping trip. I had just bought a 1987 Dodge Camper Van from a couple in CT, and I got Bruce Gustine here at the campground to check it out, make any necessary repairs, and tell me what I would need for our trip. If Bruce thought we were crazy to take a 23 year old van on an 8,000 mile trip in 100-degree heat, he did not let on. We loaded up the van, which did not take too long, because you can’t take too much in a camper van!

The trip was unforgettable, and for those of you who are wondering, we did make it back...in that same van! The trip was not without complications, however. Driving in 100+ degree heat, we did have some overheating issues over the first few days, along with a blown water hose and two blowouts. We got to know the AAA people on a first-name basis. But that was part of the adventure. Camping trips create great stories.

I’ll mention one in particular. We made some amazing stops: the Grand Canyon, Durango, Malibu Beach, Yosemite, San Francisco, Yellowstone, Lake Michigan, and Niagara Falls. We had an unexpected moment, however, in Yosemite. Because of my crowded itinerary and some van troubles early in the trip, we had to make up time, which meant some really long trips some days. We found ourselves going into Yosemite to find our campsite well after dark. We got to the park entrance only to discover it would be another hour or so to get to our site. By the time we reached our camping area around 11 p.m., we were exhausted.

We then began the process of following the campsite map to find our site in the dark. Eventually we circled around to our site...or so we thought. It was full of people sitting in chairs around a campfire—must have been 12 or more people: adults, teens, kids—having a great time. I looked at my site tag; I looked at the site number. This was definitely our campsite. I got out to speak with one of the men in the group. I told him I thought this was our site, and he mumbled that they must have made a mistake. Almost on cue, they began packing up all of their chairs, loaded them into a pickup, and within minutes, they had all vanished. My suspicion was confirmed; We had squatters!

It was obvious they had known it was not their site, and I wasn’t thrilled about that, but they ended up leaving us a gift. On a chilly night, they left us their fire. As exhausted as we were, we would never have built a fire. We would have collapsed into beds. I might have just fallen asleep in the front driver’s seat! Instead we put up a couple of chairs around the fire. That’s when I decided to look up, and I saw this odd but fascinating white, fingery shape in the sky. I was tired, but I assure you I had not been drinking! Suddenly, I realized what I was seeing.

The towering trees in our campsite created a dark shroud except for one patch of sky you could see in an opening through the branches. The sky was so full of stars that all you could see was white. It absolutely took my breath away. I’ll never forget it. I look back now and realize that if we had never decided to take a crazy
and risky trip in a 1987 Dodge Camper Van, I would have missed that moment. Camping trips create great stories.

The Bible has a couple of fascinating camping stories that I’d like to tell you about. The first one, found in the earliest pages of the Bible, involves a guy named Abraham. He lived in a town called Ur, and best we can tell, he had lived there his entire life. Abraham is in his seventies. He is settled and comfortable, but God has a plan to change all of that. One day, God shares his plan with Abraham.

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." (The Bible, Genesis 12:1-3 NIV)

You see, God had a plan to bless the entire world through the family line of Abraham. He had no idea of what we now know, thousands of years later, that hundreds of millions of people alive today can trace their family line all the way back to Abraham. God did end up creating a great nation through Abraham, but it would never have happened if he had not listened to God and made a huge move. He had to obey God and move from the only land he had ever known. You see, great stories are created on trips, and God has a great story for Abraham. So Abraham goes.

They were actually moving from one country to another country. But this was not moving as we think of moving. This was much more like a camping trip, a huge cross-country camping trip. I’ll explain. They were going to be traveling for weeks and weeks and weeks. There were no Holiday Inns along the way. They were not traveling in a Winnebago. Every night, they had to stop and set up camp for the night. They lived in tents. I don’t know--Maybe this is the first cross-country camping story recorded in the Bible. There is another interesting twist in this amazing trip. The Bible mentions this twist in its later pages, in a book of the Bible called “Hebrews.”

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (The Bible, Hebrews 11:8-10 NIV)

When we took our cross-country trip, I mapped everything out down to the specific campground or park we would stay in every single night. Of course, van engine troubles and other unexpected things disrupted my plans at points, but I had a plan. I knew each day exactly where we were headed for the night. Abraham’s story was a little different. God didn’t tell him up front where the final destination would be. It’s almost as if Abraham, every single morning he woke up, had to check in with God to see which road to take that day. Now, there is a certain
adventure to that, and some of you may have taken a trip like that, but others of you might find that unsettling.

All Abraham had was a promise from God that He had prepared a place for them to move and live. Well, they end up in a land known as Canaan, which they nicknamed “the Promised Land.” Once again, this was not a move like we make. We usually move from one house to another existing house. They moved to a plot of land and they pitched their tents. In fact, there is no record of them building a house. I wonder if Abraham just said, “why bother building a house? God may call on us to move tomorrow, so let’s just keep living in tents.” They lived like strangers in a foreign country. They didn’t live as if Canaan was their permanent location.

They lived more like campers than homeowners. Campers live on land they don’t own. They are just there temporarily. We have some of Nelson’s campers here today, but you know the guidelines of the campground. You have to maintain a permanent address somewhere else. You can’t live here forever; you are just here temporarily. That is how camping works. It is, I think, part of the fun of camping. The Bible says that Abraham was “looking forward to a city with foundations.” Tents don’t have foundations, do they? Foundations are connected to permanence.

Abraham was looking forward to “the city God is building,” the country God has prepared. And the Bible uses Abraham as an illustration of how the people who follow God should live. Christians should live like campers. Christians should live like this land is temporary. Let me take you back to that place in the Bible where I was just reading a moment ago. Listen to what it says about the followers of God who trust the promise of God.

*By faith Abraham, even though he was past age—and Sarah herself was barren—was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. 13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (The Bible, Hebrews 11:8-16, NIV)*

Here is what followers of God should understand. They are really just campers right now. We live in an amazing world, but it is a world marked by sin and brokenness and death. It is temporary. Every hospital and nursing home and funeral home reminds us of that. But the Bible is clear that there is another world, another “country,” another city that God is preparing, a place that is permanent. It is a place where people fully live out the heart of God. It is a place not marked by
disease and war and divorce and hate and death. It is variously called the kingdom of God, the city of God, heaven, or “the new earth.”

And so the Bible has this interesting instruction for Christians: “live like aliens and strangers!” What does that mean? Well, it doesn’t mean to go out and try to be bizarre or weird. We talk about “aliens” in our country. What are we talking about? It is a reference to people whose citizenship is in another country. They are in the U.S., but they belong to another country. They are only here temporarily. So, Christians are called to live like aliens. We are called to live as if we are residents of another land. We are called to live as if we are really just “camping” here. So, what does that mean?

For one, it means that we must always be open to change. Sometimes, that involves a change of location. In order to fix the broken places in our current world, God often sends people to make a difference. You see this through the history of the Bible. God called Abraham to go. He called Moses to go. He called Isaiah and Jeremiah and Jonah to go. Today, God prompts people to go to broken places to bring His hope and help. And so followers of God move to the slums of Calcutta and the streets of Amsterdam and the provinces of China and the burroughs of NYC to heal the sick and free the slaves and feed the hungry and share the good news of Jesus. Now the move God prompts is not always trans-world or cross-country. Sometimes it is just crossing the street to talk to a neighbor or taking a trip to Middletown to serve someone in need.

“Living as aliens” means that followers of Jesus have to be ready to move. They have to have a “camper” mentality. You don’t have to tell a camper to be ready to move; he or she has already planned for it. We should live in our houses as if they were tents. When you live in a tent or an RV, you expect to be on the move at some point. You live with that expectancy. It’s easy to pick up and move. God wants us to be people who think like campers, who are ready to move and step out at any time.

“Living like aliens or campers” also means that we can’t get too attached to things. We hold them loosely. We are ready to give up things more quickly. When we took our cross-country trip, we had to leave a lot of stuff behind. For some people, camping is their whole life; they camp all of the time. There are some things, then, that they choose to live without. The “camping” life involves sacrifices. I am making a tradeoff; I am giving up some things to get some irreplaceable. I give up some conveniences and luxuries so that I can enjoy the outdoors and Yosemite and the Grand Canyon and Yellowstone. It’s a worthwhile trade!

Christians must be ready to give up things. Following Jesus will cost you things. It will cost you time. It will cost you money. It will cost you some pride and control. It could cost you a friendship. For some, it has cost them their family. And on occasion, it could cost you your life. Sometimes, God sends people into danger. Why? Because the deep neediness in our world is often found in dangerous places. Sometimes doing the right thing can cost you your life. But a Christian should be
able to do that because he knows that this life is temporary anyway. She’s just a camper whose permanent address is in a different country.

In meeting the needs of our world and helping people reconcile to God and the permanent, restored world He has planned, a Christian just might lose her life. It is part of living like campers. This current world in which we live is not all there is. For most of us, following the way of Jesus will not cost us our lives, but it will always cost us something: comfort, convenience, money, pride, etc. We must be willing to make the sacrifice. That’s what campers do.

I’ve told you about Abraham’s camping story. I’ve told you that God wants us to follow Abraham’s example and live like campers. That’s the second Bible camping story. However, I’ve saved the best camping story in the Bible for last. Let me read you a verse from the Bible that talks about Jesus and a trip He took.

*The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.* *(The Bible, John 1:14, NIV)*

God took on a human body that “looked like us” and He then moved to be with us. The Bible says he “made his dwelling among us.” Those words were originally written in the Greek language, and the actual translation could be “pitched his tent among us.” God “left” the only country He had ever known to come to our land and set up His tent right next to our campsite. In coming to “camp” with us, He allowed us to see His glory. We were able to hear his truth and experience his grace.

The God who calls us to hold things loosely and be ready to move in order to bless others, did it Himself. He chose the life of a camper and the sacrifices that come with that. So, why did He come and camp here? He did it to help us get to a better “campground.” You see, God is planning a campground that is more remarkable than any place in which you’ve ever stayed. It is, in fact, our current campground—entirely remade, with no sin, hate, division, disease, or death. It is the “new earth.” I’m calling it a new campground.

The problem with calling it a campground is this: Campgrounds are temporary, but this “new earth” is permanent. At the same time, how many of us have thought, while enjoying some special moment in the great outdoors, “wouldn’t it be great if we could do this all the time?” Well, we will enjoy God’s amazing campground “all the time!”

Jesus came to tell us about this amazing place He prepared, but He also came to make it possible for us to get there. Jesus, in getting us to this campground, sacrificed more than we can ever fully grasp or appreciate. He came to rescue us from our broken sinful choices, something that would ultimately cost Him His life. He ended up being executed on a Roman cross, and in a mystery greater than we can fully comprehend, he took the just penalty our sin deserved. He died, but He did not stay dead. He came back to life three days later. His resurrection insured that our broken, sinful hearts could be made fully new and righteous. His death
and resurrection paved the way for us to enjoy Him in His grand campground without end.

All that remains for us to do is to “check in.” At every single place we stayed on our cross-country trip, we were required to check in. It could be at all hours of the day or night, but you had to check in to gain admittance. God’s campground has the same policy. You have to check in, but God’s campground has one unexpected difference from our campgrounds. It’s free to enter. Trust me, we did not find a single “free” campsite on our entire cross-country trip. You had to pay.

You don’t have to “pay” to enter God’s campground, because Jesus paid your registration fee. Here’s what that means. Don’t plan on coming to God with all your good deeds and credentials to gain entrance. Instead, come to Him with the crap of your life. Seriously. Campers know about crap! I learned that on our trip. You carry it around all the time and you have to do something with it. God invites us to bring our crap; He offers to dispose of it, clean us up, and forgive us. He welcomes us to a campground where we’ll never have to worry about our crap ever again!

Camping trips create great stories. When Jesus came to “camp” here on our earth, He made possible a story too wonderful to believe and too amazing to pass up. So, let Jesus’ camping story change your story from here on out. He invites you to “check in” today. Yes, there is a risk in entering Jesus’ campground. It will cost you something, but what you will gain is priceless.