

Chapter Five—Place

Introduction: “Where are you from, Stranger?”—or, “Y’all not from around here, are ya? Some form of those questions flows out of, especially, early, Western movies. The intent, evidently, is for the audience to take note that strangers stand out and usually are not going to be welcomed into a particular group, town, or gathering. Certainly, the conflict set up gives reason for the plot to move in one direction or another.

My wife and I heard this question in a slightly different way when we first arrived in Nashville, Tennessee in my first job with Baptists. The question was, “Who are your people?” My quick response, so as to set them at ease, and help them recognize we were no “clear and present danger to them” was, “Well, both my grandfathers were born in Tennessee.” Oddly, for me, that was not enough for those folks. There was emotional distance from that particular group for some time. In fact, not until our first born was introduced to them did we really feel we finally had a real “hello, how are you” offered. The difference, apparently, was that we had a native Tennessean, one of their people, living in our house.

These kinds of not so inclusive responses usually are classified under the category of provincialism. And the labeling is not always a positive one. It identifies those who are concerned only about their immediate group, region, locale, place. Anyone from outside that circle poses some level of threat, imagined and probably shaped by ideologies ingrained in the immediate population.

Place has an extraordinary informing and forming influence on us. And, a great deal of that influence is mostly absorbed unconsciously. Think of any characteristic about yourself: language, body language, political/philosophical/theological ideologies, scope of world view,

perspectives on demographic groups other than your own, sense of what constitutes a family, and so forth. Each and all of those will find their origins in where you come from, where you grew up, places you've lived.

Place and the Integrity Wheel

If you are keeping track, the Place spoke will be at the 10 o'clock position of the metaphorical Wheel. Considering the interface of these respective influences to this point, each of them might be interpreted now with place in mind. One's calling has connection to a place or places where one has sensed calling. One's heroes/heroines have places of reference important for us. The influence of memory-hope shouldn't require much imagination for place/places being the locus of experiences which energize us for our present and into our futures. Of course, Place, like the other influences, finds anchorage in the hub, Worship.

The Bible and Place

Biblical reference points for place can find their way naturally through each of these spokes and the hub of the wheel. Both the Old Testament people and the New Testament people gave emphasis to place and places.

The Old Testament and Place--Sometime read the Old Testament solely with the idea of place in mind. Be ready to spend some time just listing the place names. As with many cultures both ancient and modern, place names had symbolic meaning. Rocks were named after an experience with God at that place. The Hebrews, especially their prophets, were careful to

remind people that they should not worship some of the places, like groves of trees, as some of their pagan neighbors did. Rather, they were to look beyond the place to the God of the Place(s). For the Hebrews, the places were a constant reminder of God as Creator of the places.

The history of the Hebrews as a people is wrapped around places. The father of the Hebrews, Abram/Abraham began as an other-than-Jehovah worshipper in the land of Ur. And, ironically, he followed what he interpreted as a calling from Jehovah to “a land he knew not.” The linking of calling and place can stir emotions in our own time. Every move we have made has had an element of unexpectedness about it, certainly after we arrived at the destination.

The land to which Abram/Abraham headed was Canaan. Abram became Abraham in association with his movement out of Canaan, to Egypt, back to Canaan. A covenant arrangement was set up about which much of the rest of the Old Testament fleshes out and broadens, all the while pointing, as we have the advantage of retrospect, to the new covenant.

The connections of place and home in the theological consciousness of the Hebrews finds no better illustration than that of Jacob’s/Israel’s portion of his death bed instructions to Joseph that his body be taken home, Canaan. Three times, in Genesis 49 and 50, the location is given, once by Jacob: “. . . bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Ephron the Hittite, in the cave that is in the field at Mach-pe’lah, to the east of Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess as a burying place” (Gen. 49:29-31, RSV).

Then, Joseph related that location to Pharaoh as he sought permission to take his father’s body to Canaan (Gen. 50:5) A portion of the narrative describes that the sons of Jacob did get his body to the Cave of Mamre, at the field of Machpe’lah. The arrangement of the burial place by Abraham

with Ephron the Hittite can be found in Genesis 23. Timelines are difficult to determine, especially among the early characters of the Bible. But, the power of generations of oral tradition cannot be underestimated when the home place is kept in mind.

The rest of the history of the Hebrews swirled around this Promised Land, eventually in the minds of the Exodus people as a land that “flowed with milk and honey”—their idyllic place. A not so close examination of this mostly desert land would cause one to question those Hebrews’ sense of reality. Their intention to get there and stay there and get back there—after the deportation—can inform us about the matter of home. Where is home? The cliché “home is where the heart is” holds more truth than fallacy here. Ancestral memories no doubt shaped those Hebrews sense of getting home. Memory-hope on a huge scale was in operation.

Cultural-theological-ethical conflict was a constant from the time the Hebrews moved into Canaan through the deportations and returns. Heroes/heroines figure prominently throughout these stretches of the Hebrews being related to by God and their respective responses. Places of origins usually appear for the prophets, plus the places in which they made their pronouncements or prophetic actions.

Two prophets, particularly, stand out as persons who fulfilled their callings in difficult places. Jeremiah had to prophesy about the judgment coming. That job carried nearly impossible expectations, of course. Those expectations were exceeded only by the reality that Jeremiah had to stay and watch the invasion and deportation of friends, neighbors, fellow Hebrews.

Ezekiel, a contemporary of Jeremiah, was included in the deported group. As far as we know, he never left Babylon. But, in a foreign setting, he provided pastoral-prophetic help to the Hebrews.

The being in place role which Jeremiah and Ezekiel played provides a model for all the generations following. Though we undoubtedly prefer a “comfort zone” place for our vocational practice, our family life, and cultural context in general, more often than not there is some level of difficulty, tension/stress, relational strain. Ironically, it is in those places that our strengths get more defined and exercised. Identifications of character weaknesses are also part and parcel of such places.

The New Testament and Place—One could learn a great deal about the influence of place taking note of the place names associated with the life of Jesus. Bethlehem, the place of his birth; Nazareth, the location of his growing up and likely the place of so many of what we have to call the silent years. Crossing the ethnic boundaries to go through Samaria brings together circumstantial evidence of how he was brought up and how he understood with whom he could relate.

Jesus visited lots of places and spaces in his role as the Son of God, with more than a little projection of how, when, and where he would meet his demise for the sake of God. Locations are given for his trial, execution, and burial. Furthermore, enough details of post-Resurrection appearances lead one to believe these occurrences happened among real people who stood upon real floor space. Perhaps these pictures of reality are one of the main ways to establish for readers of Scripture to understand that the Incarnation happened. And, the expectations for human behavior are to be met in real time and space. Such behavior is intended to display the reality of the transformational power of the One who walked and talked among humans.

Luke was an excellent historian. He could operate in our own time with his style and propensity toward details, especially, for instance related to the missionary trips of Paul. With some background study finding where those cities, roads, shipping lanes fit into the economical,

political, and theological contexts of that time, one can realize some sense of the influence, the impact, of our own travels can have on us.

Do not miss that most of the letters attributed to Paul, or at least a close associate, the greetings are to believers, “saints,” in cities. Those were commercial centers in the Roman empire. The locations, generally, were places to which Paul had traveled. Because he had passed through, or even lived in, many of those places. We notice the letters were contextualized to those people, those ecclesial gatherings. Paul understood that places in the Roman empire had, because of the empire’s network built on consistent allegiance to the current Caesar a kind of similarity. Still, cultural differences across the empire provided Paul reasons for saying some of the same ideas in slightly different ways. Paul knew that place influences how one listens, hears, Good News.

Paul left us some correspondence that indicates he understood the importance of the right people being in the right place so the right job could be done. His letter to Titus provides us a First-Century portrait of the importance of someone sticking by her or his convictions, even in a difficult place, one that resists that person’s core beliefs. The connection to the Old Testament prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, come to mind as those who undoubtedly influenced Paul’s sense of ministerial responsibility toward being called to be in, with, be influenced by but influencing a place.

Paul’s letter to Titus gives us, as with other of Paul’s letters, like to the church at Corinth, “one side of a phone conversation.” But, Paul’s points are clear enough to understand Titus had contacted him with a question something like, “Why did you leave me here? Can you help me move?” Paul agreed that the people of Crete were difficult to understand and work with. But, ironically, all those negatives about them were the reasons why Paul had given charge to building a congregation there to Titus. Pastoral and managerial skills that maybe even Titus had

not recognized in himself were just the skills needed for a group of people to organize into an expression of Christianity on the island of Crete.

Perhaps difficult to recognize are that the challenges implicit and explicit in a place also hold the calling of God. Certainly, there is the necessity for one to discern when it is time to stay longer and when it's time to "shake the dust from one's feet."

Contrary to some preachers who claim superior knowledge with regard to details about where heaven is located, not much comes from the New Testament regarding exact location. John in his Revelation, full of Jewish apocalypticisms, relates that "heaven" is resplendently idyllic if described in human terms. The primary image is that "heaven" is where God is—which reinforces an idea with continuity especially in the Gospels. A thought to inspire our imaginations is that heaven, eternal life, can be experienced to some degree in the here and now, in the places where we are already located. Allowing that imagination to become experientially real will certainly be a rejection to those who rely on the power motive inherent in using leverage on people about "pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye."

Identify Your Places

Generally, and to this point of the chapter, "place" has a geographical location in mind. The exercise that follows is intended to assist one to become more in touch with the influence(s) place has had upon you. For, most of us simply assume upon the idea that we know, we understand, our places. The less we understand, the more provincial we are, possibly.

1. Can you name and describe the place where you were born? Was it in a hospital, in a car on the way to the hospital, at home? What were the events around your birth like? Have

you ever considered why you can answer those questions? Have you ever put yourself in the context of what your birth was like for your parents?

2. Describe the house(s) in which you grew up. Was it a house you felt comfortable having friends come to visit you, to stay over? If you did not feel comfortable having visitors, was it because of the physical condition of the house? Was it because of the level of conflict found in the house? Did you have a room/space you could call yours in the house? If not, what were the space arrangements, allowances, for each person? Did you have a space in that house which you could find privacy, sanctuary? Or, was there a location nearby you could find solace, your place?
3. Who were your closest neighbors in this house or houses of your growing up? Would “closest” be described in terms of distance or relationally? Were there boundary lines, literal or imaginary you were told not to cross. Were there neighbors, people, who you were taught to avoid? What were the reasons given for avoiding them?
4. Was the house(s) in which you grew up in a rural area? A small community? A small town? A medium sized town? A large town? A small city? A medium sized city? A large city? What do you recall as benefits of the size place in which you grew up? The detriments?
5. Were you home schooled? Where were the schools where you received pre-elementary, elementary, secondary, post-secondary, graduate education? Do you have any acquaintances or friends from any of those places?
6. If you grew up in the United States, what state? What region of the United States? If not the United States, what country? What part of the world?

7. If you had the choice to live in a particular kind of context, for example the beach, the desert, the plains, the mountains, the tropics, on a lake, the woods, a combination of any of these?
8. Since the early years where have you lived? What have those houses, population areas, etc. been like? What are the impact of those places on you, do you think/?
9. Name and describe your idyllic place. The descriptions you imagine of your idyllic place begin to provide some sense of identification of what you think of as heaven. If you make room for heaven to be on earth, what might your idyllic place be like, then?

Places Other than Geographical

Most readers, if still staying with the content, will already be considering “place” to have a broader and deeper meaning than that of location geographically.

Thinking of “home,” again, probably most people will answer the question of “what’s your definition of home?” with more than a location, as in a town. If allowed to develop the thought, they more than likely will relate an atmosphere, a sense, a perception of fulfillment, being at ease, able to let down, a safe and secure place, a sanctuary. That identification perhaps will be described as happening maybe only occasionally, possibly with a certain friend or relative.

“When I am with (fill in a name), I have a feeling of peace, comfortability; I can be myself. All the fronts I put up day to day can come down. I feel like I am understood.” A space in which we can be at home, that is a place that has value for us.

Some research contends that one’s location in the birth order of one’s siblings makes a difference on one’s psychology, relational skills, attitudes toward conflict management, communication

skills and all those other matters listed at the beginning of the chapter on how place affects everything about us. Of course, there are research studies that contend that birth order doesn't have such impact on how the facets of one's internal and external life develop.

The existential tension of birth order comes to the fore, though, as one initiates one's own unscientific research sampling. Talk to only children. Talk to middle children. Talk to the oldest, the youngest siblings. Patterns will begin to form for you. These conversations may reveal what the individuals have been educated toward through platitudes and clichés during their rearing. Quite possibly, though, one may perceive the impression that children are treated differently according to their birth order. Locations, financial standing, vocational pursuits of parents—all have influence on children depending upon these factors influences on a family and when they occur.

One must bring into consideration the sibling accounts in scripture. Indeed, some, like Jacob, acted like they do because of parental favoritism. That dynamic certainly persisted on into Jacob's style of parenting with regard to how he related to his sons, particularly Joseph. The family situation in David's family reads like a soap opera as competition for the throne evolves.

Have you noticed how difficult it is for children, teenagers, even those in their twenties to be able to estimate fairly closely the age of those who are middle aged, and especially senior adults? The difficulty is no less than how too many senior adults cannot estimate very accurately the age of those in any of the generations younger than themselves. With these extremes, as well as along the way of ages of people, too many people consider their generation to be a superior one.

So, place can be considered, also, from the angle of stage of life generationally in which we find ourselves. Considerable attention has come in recent years to where the "generation" portions of

a population reside--for example, the baby boomers, the generation x, the generation y (more popularly the millennials), and the generation z. Too often these generational designations are used more as a reason to keep these age groups separated. The result is that, indeed, emotional distance, mutual exclusion, and even adversarial dynamics are given nourishment and cultivation.

A lack of imagination can be at the core of these generational conflicts, by all parties involved. Bias, prejudicial attitudes, are given free rein, rather than giving the benefit of the doubt of those not of our respective generation. As well, a lack of self-perception is at work, especially among the older generations. Surely some of them can recognize the basic dynamics alive in the younger generations with which they dealt in their own younger years. Too, the older generations don't know how to recognize the level of threatenedness the younger generations provide. But, not just the older ones are living out of a sense of their own self-interests only. Others' life interests, neighborly kindness, beyond their own kind of people (age group) should motivate their relationships and community actions to be on behalf of those beyond theirs and their kind of folks.

Christian Scripture, especially the Old Testament, relates the importance of stages/places in life with the genealogical records left. Narratives on different heroes/heroines of the Old Testament Hebrews notice activities, particularly interchange with God, at particular stages of life.

Jacob's life is detailed from his birth until his death. Not so positive character traits peculiar to him at early stages seem to be transformed with experiences in his later years. Most of David's life is related. As well, there are notable, meritorious acts described, along with those actions on

David's part that have to be identified as not so good. These records should cause each of us to be able to identify experiences, attitudes, patterns of vices and virtues at stages of our lives.

Conclusion—

With the categories of place in mind, spend a little time reflecting on these questions:

Where did I come from?

How far back can I go with regard to family heritage, my genealogy?

Are there any characteristics—physiologically, psychologically, theologically, socially that I recognize as having made their way from those ancestors on to me?

What are the geographical locations for those family members in my history? What are/were vocations practiced by these people?

Where am I?

What is my stage in life?

What biases can I identify about myself which have been informed and formed by my places? Who can I discuss the idea of biases, potential discriminatory practices I might be projecting?

How is my generational identification affecting my sense of place?

Would I identify my life overall to be in a good place or a not so good place? Why?

How can I deal with any sense of being in places where difficulties are apparent?

Where am I going?

How do the places in which I find myself have impact upon my sense of direction of life into whatever future I to which I can give aspiration?

What can I contribute to others regarding their sense of what place means for their lives?

Place—possibly the concept is assumed upon. Perhaps this chapter, though, has raised some sense of curiosity to explore further the concept of place, especially as related to what it means to be a person of integrity.