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Submerged into Life

I'm sure no one had ever asked me that question before.

I was in an old school bus, it was a kind of worn-yellow painted by the unrelenting elements and of central washington. We were winding through switchbacks and meandering our way up the cascades. Ben asked me "what topography feels like home to you?" In what topography do you *belong*? You know, what *place*. Is it the mountains of the pacific northwest, or Appalachia, the plains, or the prairies? Maybe on the shore. Or the dessert. Just one look, and it's like you can sink your body down and be at rest for a while. Some of us probably feel like our identity and who we are is shaped by a particular bioregion more than some other markers.

On Indiginous peoples day weekend it is worth noting the basic wisdom of native peoples. The land holds profound meaning for us. It matters. And as people of the incarnation: we know physicality is not an afterthought, but is central to who we are. God became a human and moved down here.

It has never taken humans long, though, to use land to divide, oppress, exploit, and create borders and boundaries. Things that are needed in a world of sin, but also are tools of exclusion that shape political and cultural identities for generations. Not always for the better. They give us words like foreigner. A word that plays prominently today.

So we might ask: what topography seems foreign to you? God-made, human-made, sin-made.

The politics and identities wrapped up in the complexities of topography and geography and borders that we create in them all around us.

Naaman is an enemy and outsider of the highest order. A commander of the enemy's army. A great military leader at the expense of Israel. He had wreaked havoc there. Literally. A foreigner in more ways than one. Yet he is living with leprosy. He is told to go wash in the Jordan, that small and unassuming stream, and be made clean. His first response is, why there? There are rivers where I'm from that certainly are worthy. Water that is more powerful and beautiful and glorious. Eventually, this confident and proud person of status is persuaded by a quiet and confident voice. One that could have easily been ignored. He goes down and is healed. Changed.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is in the region, on land, in space, between samaria and Galilee. A certain topography and geography. A liminal space.

As Francisco Garcia notes, “Geography matters. Verses 17:11-12 in Luke state that Jesus, on the way to Jerusalem, “passed through the midst of Samaria and Galilee,” and “entered into a certain village.” This means that this entire healing encounter between Jesus and the ten men with a skin disease takes place in a geographic borderland that is neither Samaria nor Galilee. The borderlands—we learn from Chicana writer and activist Gloria Anzaldúa, whose context is the U.S.-Mexican border—are more than a geographic boundary. They are “a psychic, social, and cultural terrain that we inhabit, and that inhabits all of us.” She writes that while borders “are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them ... ” a “borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary ... the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.”

We know the topography of borderlands. What they look like and feel like. What ghosts live there. We know what fears come to life. No certainty to be found. Neither here nor there. Where things are far from resolved. Where there are more questions than answers. As much as the topography seems foreign to us, it’s also like a home whether we like it or not. All at the same time. Borderlands materialize all around us. In a hospital keeping vigil with a beloved one, journeying in a strained relationship with someone who was once familiar. You are an empty nester but retirement is decades away. Who are you, what is your purpose?

Maybe you are in high school and your whole life feels like a borderland. Who are you becoming and what is happening to this planet of ours that you have inherited. Climate change is accelerating, but we have not passed the point of no return. Where are we? So many *ends* so little resolution.

The topography of our heart might seem like a borderland too.

Jesus occupies the middle place. With the ten. Cast aside because of their condition. And heals them. He then lifts up the faith of a foreigner, the only one who gives praise to God.

From there, Jesus will go to another middle place. In between two common criminals. On a hill outside the city. Topography of Loss, pain, rejection, and death populate the landscape. There he goes all the way down to all of the ends that we experience. Fully identifying with them all. The borderlands of holy Saturday lead to Sunday his and ours.

Geographically, we are here. Surrounded by topography of sorts that tells us who we are no matter what. Not plateaus or valleys, but everything carved in hope by the Jordan river. Wherever it runs it carries us somewhere in its tide. We are safe and held in these waters and its

waves. We have been submerged in it. Not seven times, only three. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. A foreigner because of our sin we now belong with God's forever. There we have met our end and our beginning. In its waters we have completely died and risen again. We have been healed of all that can finally ail us at the last. We are forgiven. Our graves are open today. We are children of God. Period. Loved with a fierceness that crosses every world built boundary to get to you.

Now, we still live our lives in the borderlands. Between our first death and the claiming of those baptismal promises. The terrain in front of us is illuminated by Christ himself who has gone ahead of us on the way. He's waiting for us on the other side of every wall, no matter the fortress. After all, the word of God himself cannot be chained. And those walls are only temporary now anyway.

Baptized, we cross man-made borders and reach out to those deemed unclean by our own definitions. Even those we proclaim just as outside of God's mercy as an enemy general. We even embrace ourselves as we have been embraced by God in all the particularity of an enfleshed redeemer. We live together in the in between. We need each other here. Physical places fraught with ambiguity now become places of encounter, where the crucified one resides. We meet others at the ends of the world. We listen and are served. Just as we are spoken to and served by Jesus today, the unlikely Lord of reversals. Who brings life out of death each day.

We behold every place, high and low, through the eyes of faith. Against all odds we find our tongues untied, in the choir of strangers, foreigners, and outcasts, now all together, praising God.