

# **Travels with the Spirit: A Summer Travelogue Through the Book of Acts Travel Testimony**

## **“Unexpected Moments”**

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I'm not much of a planner. I'm more of an improviser. However, it's pretty hard to take a trip without making some preparations ahead of time - Where's my passport again? Who'll take care of my dog and water my plants? Where am I staying? What do I HAVE to see and how can I schedule those things while I'm there?

As I thought about the traveling I've done, and especially as I considered how travel has affected my spiritual understanding, it occurred to me that the most spiritually impactful moments I've had during my travels usually weren't the things I thought would be the most impactful when I made my plans. My trips have usually been built around big, inspiring places and moments. But in the end, the experiences that stuck with me often were things I hadn't planned at all.

In 2008, I traveled with a group of fellow voice students from the University of Iowa to Milan, Italy, where we staged a production of Don Giovanni with a local director. Along with a fairly grueling rehearsal schedule, our faculty sponsor had curated a number of pretty amazing experiences for us: Touring the Duomo, one of the great gothic cathedrals in Europe, attending an opera at La Scala, one of the most famous opera houses in the world, touching THE manuscript of Giuseppe Verdi's *Requiem*, and visiting Leonardo da Vinci's mural painting of "The Last Supper." This was a laundry list of awe-inspiring moments. And there is no doubt that I felt a sense of wonder and gratefulness for every one of them. And yet, the one moment on that trip where I know I experienced the divine happened on an ordinary afternoon as I wandered the city. One of our rehearsal spaces was near Sant'Ambrogio, a large cathedral surrounded by a piazza. In fact, the first cathedral erected at that location was built by St. Ambrose himself around the year 380. I went inside the cathedral, walking slowly around the space, my footsteps echoing amongst the pillars. Soon a tour guide approached me and asked if I wanted to visit the crypt. "Sure, why not?" I casually replied, and descended the stairs. There, lying in state, was St. Ambrose himself. I was not prepared for that moment. It was not at all what I expected to see, and I was awestruck, there in that cool crypt below the altar of that cathedral. I stayed there for a long time, and I considered that despite how long ago St. Ambrose lived and how different his life was from my own, there was a connection between us, a shared human experience. And the memory of St. Ambrose is alive in this modern city, in part because his body is protected and preserved by an ancient structure rebuilt upon a cornerstone he laid himself. And I thought about how humans have honored their dead not only as a way to preserve their eternal life or spirit, but also so people can remember those who have come before. And because we are all connected through this thread of history, maybe it's important that I see this man lying in state and know that he and I likely shared similar hopes, dreams, and desires.

When I finally emerged from the cathedral, I sat on a bench while my eyes adjusted to the sunlight. Soon, an older woman and her granddaughter crossed the square. The little girl was singing a melody I recognized. Not a pop song, not a nursery rhyme, but an opera aria: “Una furtiva Lagrima” from *L’Elisir d’amore* by Gaetano Donizetti. The grandmother beamed at the girl as she sang, and for a fleeting moment, we all shared the beauty of that melody in the piazza. This young girl’s voice, not the voice of a trained opera singer, was the most entrancing music I heard on that trip.

I actually think about that afternoon quite frequently. What is it that makes these kinds of experiences possible? Is it mere chance that I ended up in that place at that time on that particular day? I can’t help but think that being in a place so different from Iowa, in a city packed with monuments to human achievement in architecture and culture, prepared me to be open to experiencing God in that place. But I didn’t experience that awe and wonder in the places where I expected to find it.

So, as I was pondering what this all meant in terms of faith, the story of Elijah kept popping up. Life as a prophet for him was pretty frustrating. He believed he’d done what God wanted him to do, but the rulers wouldn’t listen, and his life was threatened, so he flees. Things weren’t supposed to be like that. Elijah is told that he must go on a journey and stand out on the mountain where God would pass by. And so Elijah waits in a cave on the mountain: (from 1 Kings 19:11-13) Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind, and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake, **12** and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire, and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. **13** When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?”

Elijah travels out of fear for his own life, but he also has to travel to meet God. And when God speaks to him, God doesn’t appear as we might expect. And yet, it was only after Elijah had wandered on his own and calmed his anxious mind, that he could truly experience God - not in the earthquake, the fire, or the wind, but as a still small voice. And it’s important to note that Elijah recognizes God in that silence. And so, I think part of traveling that speaks to my faith is being open to the unexpected, open to improvise in the midst of planning, and open to the voice that speaks in the silence.

To quote my favorite traveler: “It’s a dangerous business, going out of your door. You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.”