

Travels with the Spirit: A Summer Travelogue Through the Book of Acts
Travel Testimony
“My Travel File”
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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Decorah, Iowa

I’ve had some wondrous travel adventures.

- I once rode a camel to dinner in the Australian Outback.
- Exactly 50 summers ago, I climbed to the top of Rome’s Pantheon dome, i.e., on the outside. I pulled my prone self to the edge of the 27-foot diameter opening at the very top, for a god’s eye view of the magnificent interior.
- In August of 1978 I met Helen and Roy Carlson at the Great Wall of China.

But today I’m going to tell you about an ordinary AMTRAK trip from La Crosse WI to New Haven CT in the spring of 2018. It begins somewhat inauspiciously: a little mixup about when our trip is supposed to start: we think April 6; AMTRAK thought April 5. It’s a longer story, but we work it out, for a small fee, and, by 8:30 a.m. on April 6, 2018, Glenn and I are off to La Crosse. We get there just as the depot opens, 9:45. The Empire Builder arrives on time. We settle into our seats, with trail mix, biscotti, baked oatmeal, and gluten-free banana bread for our brunch. We anticipate a relaxing five-hour ride to Chicago. We’ll arrive with a 3-hour cushion before our Capitol Limited departs. For fun, we’re going by way of Washington D. C. this time.

But somewhere around Columbus WI we lose all of that cushion and more: a pickup truck hits the train, damaging the siding on two cars and taking out a door; the driver is helicoptered to the hospital. (We learn about this in bits and pieces as we linger on the track between Columbus and Milwaukee, waiting for officials to arrive, to assess damages, and to give permission to proceed.) We eat trail mix, etc. and snacks that AMTRAK provides. A thoroughly good-natured family of five is traveling with us on the Empire Builder. They’ve been on the train since it started in Portland OR, and are ready to be home this night in Jackson MI. At this point, it doesn’t look promising. But they laugh and laugh. And we laugh, too.

When it’s clear that connections are going to be missed, conductor Dave comes through the train to console and tell us what our options are. Ours is to go to Passenger Services at Union Station, get a hotel voucher, find a place to stay for the night, and book the Capitol Limited for the next day.

Okay, so we get to Union Station, we queue up at Passenger Services, and during our 45-minute wait to see an agent we think about that truck driver, and about the family from Michigan. Their connecting train, the Wolverine, didn't wait for them. And then another "long shot" option occurs to us: the Lakeshore Ltd. doesn't leave till 9:30 p.m.—but 9:30 is coming fast. We luck out with our agent, one of three working with us unfortunate travelers. After considerable discussion and research, Bertha gets us booked on the Lakeshore to NYC, with a connection to New Haven, right out of Penn Station. And she even finds us a sleeper! Then, having done her best work, Bertha could have told us to find our way to track 17. But she takes us in hand, unlocks the door of the Metropolitan Lounge, which is already closed for the day, and leads us all the way to the gate access point. The train is already boarding! We get ourselves and our luggage up and onto our sleeping car, giving a wide berth to a passenger who is loudly berating an AMTRAK attendant. Best to stay away from her, we think.

All is well. We calm down, get some rest. Next day in the dining car, where you don't choose your table or your table companions, we are seated with the very person we had determined to avoid. Carolyn. Carolyn had come a distance already—from the northwest. She's heading to NYC to join friends in another women's march. She's also prepared to proclaim the good news of the Instant Pot to anyone who will listen, and she has packed one of those marvels for her friend and host, who lives in a very small apartment. She tells us that she's involved in the arts scene back home in Oregon, and that at Christmas time she had helped to decorate—with "pussy hats"—a large pine tree in front of the local arts museum. We saw photos. And, just incidentally, she mentions that she suffers from a kind of dystrophy, an incurable, degenerative muscular disease that is ever more compromising her mobility and sapping her strength. What we had tried to avoid as we got on the train was a discussion about handicapped accommodation.

But now, for us, things have been going very well indeed; but as we're approaching Schenectady, we face another challenge. We learn that the train has not made up enough lost time, is more than an hour late, and if things don't improve, we'll miss our connection in NYC--the last train to New Haven. So, having narrowly avoided an overnight somewhere in Chicago, we may face taxis and an unfamiliar nightlife in New York City.

As we're fussing and trying to be calm about this possibility, Carolyn appears at our door. She asks if she can sit. She'd inferred that we might be in trouble, and she'd gathered all her strength to walk the length of the car to give us a tip: if we leave the train a few stops short of Penn Station, she happens to know, we can catch a local to Grand Central. And from there, we can get to New Haven easily.

Finally, we decide to risk going all the way to Penn Station, and we make our connection by a whisker. That trip has the desired on-time ending. No big deal. But now, when I think back on that ordinary trip, I have the sweet memory of a family from Michigan that meets travel adversity with peals of laughter; and of two women—Bertha and Carolyn—who showed two old travelers extraordinary kindness. And maybe I'm a bit closer to understanding the nature of God's grace.