

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

As a graduate student, I had the opportunity to spend a year studying and conducting archival research in Germany as a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Heidelberg. My time spent there, as well as traveling during the university’s generous vacation periods, made me aware of how cultures evolve or develop differently than others, even those in close proximity. I also came to appreciate the centuries-old religious heritage I saw around me, even if much of it was from traditions that were different from my own.

As I traveled, I visited churches representing architectural and artistic traditions that had developed over the centuries. In Norway, I attended services in the 800-year-old church in Selbu, where both sets of my grandparents were married, and where my father was baptized; and I attended a Christmas Eve service in Nidaros Cathedral in Trondheim. I also visited Catholic churches in Germany, France, and Italy, Orthodox churches in Greece, Protestant churches in Norway, Denmark, and Germany, and a Jewish synagogue and museum in Prague.

But my most memorable experience in a European church wasn’t in Germany or Norway, as you might imagine, but in France. Chartres Cathedral is early Gothic, with world-renowned stained glass windows from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When it was designated as a World Heritage Site, UNESCO described it as "the high point of French Gothic art." (If you’re not familiar with Chartres Cathedral and its magnificent stained glass windows, there are some excellent websites that provide great photos; simply google “Chartres stained glass windows.”)

We arrived in Chartres late in the afternoon, planning to explore the Cathedral the next morning. When we went to dinner near our hotel, we saw a poster advertising a concert that evening in the Cathedral: a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. We quickly ate our dinner (probably scandalizing the French restaurateur in the process), and went to see if there were any tickets available. Unfortunately, the concert was sold out. But as we turned to walk dejectedly back to our hotel, a young man who was walking by asked, “Êtes-vous étudiantes?” (Are you students?) “Oui,” I replied—still safely within the limits of my French vocabulary. He motioned for us to follow him to a side door, where there was a small booth selling student admissions to the concert. There were no seats remaining in the Cathedral, but the student tickets allowed us to sit on the steps along the nave, near the West entrance. We didn’t have a direct view of the full orchestra at the far end of the nave, but we could hear it well. And from our seats on the steps, we marveled at the majestic columns and Gothic arches.

We also had a spectacular view of the early thirteenth century stained glass windows across the nave from us, as well as the twelfth century rose window over the Cathedral’s West Entrance. Although it was a dark evening, the windows were illuminated by the Cathedral’s exterior lighting, and their renowned cobalt blue images were spectacular.

A nineteenth century Romantic symphony seems a bit incongruous in a Gothic cathedral. I feared that the sound would be lost in its vastness. But I soon came to wonder if any other venue could do it justice. Despite its size, we heard the orchestra and chorus extremely well, and as we sat listening to the “Ode to Joy,” with our fantastic views of the Gothic columns, arches, and stained glass windows, I had what I

think can best be described as a “sense of the sublime.” Although it was a secular musical performance, in its own way it was a “religious experience.”

We wanted to thank the young man who had directed us to the student entrance: buy him a cup of coffee, or perhaps a glass of wine after the concert. But after he had showed us where to get the tickets, he disappeared into the church, and we never saw him again. He was what a former pastor in Pullman, WA, used to describe as an otherwise ordinary person who plays the role of an “angel” – not bearing wings or descending from Heaven with a choir, but rather someone who profoundly touches our lives with a very simple act.

Since my retirement in 2013, I’ve been fortunate to be an enrichment speaker on cruise ships. That has enabled Mickey and me to travel to many places we would otherwise never have visited. Whenever we travel, as we see or experience something very different from my own background, I usually say, “It’s a long way from Bow, Washington,” the rural area where I grew up.

Interestingly, on many of the cruises we’ve met people with connections to Decorah and Luther College. Sometimes they’re a Luther alum, asking if I know how some of their favorite professors are doing. A few have been grandparents of Luther alumni, curious to know if their granddaughter or grandson had been one of my students. Often, they’re long-time friends of people here. It’s not uncommon for me to have a guest approach me, and after confirming that I live in Decorah and taught at Luther, ask me something like, “Do you know [Reg and Jeri Laursen, ... or Gail and David Judisch, ... or Bob and Marilyn Larson]?”

That kind of experience reminds me that despite the vastness and grandeur of God’s creation, in some ways, it is indeed “a small world,” no matter how far I am away from Bow, Washington. It reinforces the value of friendships, and the strength of long-lasting personal ties. And it also reminds me that we never know how our lives may have touched others, and that what we do in our lives and careers, and how we treat those we come to know as colleagues, students, friends, or even strangers, can leave a lasting impression and be a legacy of our lives. The young man at Chartres Cathedral undoubtedly assumed that I enjoyed the concert. But he had no way of knowing how profoundly I was moved by the experience. How many times has something simple that we have done for others had a much deeper impact on them than we might ever expect? In other words, how often might we unknowingly serve as “angels” in others’ lives?