Stranger in a Strange Land
Deuteronomy 10:12-19
Hank Millstein

There's a favorite Charlie Brown cartoon of mine that, if I remember right, has Linus complaining to Charlie Brown that he's afraid to go to the library because the huge building seems so strange and he feels so out of place there. Charlie tells him not to worry, because "everyone," he says, "has a place where they feel they don't belong, where they feel they're out of place." "Oh," says Linus, "where do you feel out of place, Charlie Brown?" And Charlie Brown puts his chin in his hands and says simply, "Earth."

I think we all feel that ways some of the time. Some of us may even feel like that all of them. Sometimes it's easy to feel yourself a stranger on planet earth—even in your own home and with your own family and friends.

Funny thing is, the Bible has a lot to say about being a stranger. In fact, the Bible seems to regard being a stranger as

the normal human condition—maybe even the necessary condition for hearing the voice of God. Today's Scripture reminds us that we always need to keep in mind our status as strangers. "Treat the stranger right," it says, "because you've been strangers yourselves."

So I'm going to talk today about one of my experiences of being a stranger. It's all about the many years that I spent—and am still spending—at Warm Springs. That's why I'm wearing this ribbon shirt—it's one of the gifts I got while I lived there—some other gifts are on the altar today. But the greatest gift I got there was learning how to be what the Bible calls a sojourner—a stranger at home.

How I came to Warm Springs: by chance. I was looking for an opportunity to collect some stories, record, transcribe, and translate them, and incorporate them into a doctoral dissertation. I was there to "use" Warm Springs materials. I planned to be there no more than one year.

It took me a long time—nine months—before I was able to collect and record my first story—and that was on condition that I not publish it. The story was Amtanat and Chainach—"bride and bridgeroom", about the origin of two major features of the landscape, Black Butte and Green Ridge. By the time I listened to and recorded that story, I was beginning to realize that I had nothing meaningful to say about it. I had all the tools of linguistic and folkloristic analysis that I had learned in academia, but I hadn't lived into the landscape, physical, social, and spiritual, from which those stories emerged. I began to realize that what I was seeking was more than just grist for the mill of my dissertation in the far-off world of Boston University. Making something of value out of my sojourn at Warm Springs would have to be more than just putting sounds on tape and words on paper; there was a life to be lived here, a life that in some way I, though an outsider, had to live in to. I couldn't just

come and go as a stranger; I had to join in the rhythms of the land and community.

So I couldn't just remain a stranger at Warm Springs. And I didn't. Within my first year there, I was invited to join in some of their religious life. Now I have to say something about that life. On your bulletin cover today is a photograph of Matilda Mitchell, who became one of my friends and collaborators in the language work I did. But she was much more. She's shown in that photo ringing a bell—for she was a bell-ringer at the weekly services in the longhouse at Simnasho where she lived, one of the three longhouses on the reservation where one of the traditional religions is still carried on. Now I should say something about the meaning of the word "religion" in Warm Springs. There isn't even a native word for that, but what the English word "religion" means in Warm Springs English is different from what we take it for. To us Euro-Americans, "religion" suggests a system of beliefs and practices that stand

in competition with and usually in contradiction to other "religions." So you have Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and so forth; and even within a single "religion" like Christianity, you have mutually incompatible versions of the religion like Methodism, Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, and so forth. It's not usually expected or even accepted that a person could accept or fully participate in more than one "religion" at the same time. Not so at Warm Springs. A "religion" there is simply one way of worshipping the Creator, not incompatible with other ways, including Anglo forms of Christianity. No one looks askance at a person who belongs at once to the longhouse religion and to, say, the Baptist Church. Warm Springs religions have been "hospitable" to Euro-American religion in ways that a traditionalist of the latter might find disconcerting. But the "hospitality" of Warm Springs religion runs even deeper.

The religion that Matilda is shown leading in the photo is usually called the "7-drum" religion, referring to the seven

drummers that sing the songs central to it, or the "waashat," referring to a sacred circular dance around the longhouse done to the accompaniment of the songs. This religion goes back to ancient roots; a form of it was witnessed by the very first whites to visit the Plateau region where the Warm Springs and related tribes live. For a time, it took on a distinctly anti-white-settler cast, under the leadership of a visionary named Smohalla in the late 19th century, who taught that the idea of selling mother earth, as demanded by the white treat-makers, was unthinkable to Indians. The religion took on a defiant tone. Yet now a sea change has come over it, and it has adapted once again. If you ever get to visit a waashat service, you may be surprised to hear Jesus invoked in the prayers interspersed between the songs. And people will tell you that the message of the songs is that same as that given in the bible. People believe they received long ago through their worship songs, even the most sacred wordless ones, the message that came

to whites in their bible. So the people felt they could accept what the white missionaries were bringing without giving up their native traditions and spirituality. Exactly how they came to that understanding I don't know; it's worth noting that other tribes came to quite opposite conclusions, holding that everything in Euro-American religion had to be resolutely rejected and the native traditions maintained untainted. But that's not the route that Warm Springs, and for that matter many other Native Americans, went.

I should also note that the waashat, while probably the most prominent, was by not means the only religion at Warm Springs. Another religion I was privileged to participate in was the wasklikt, literally the "spinning" religion, which drew on traditional practices of spiritual healing, and got its name from the "spinning" that individuals sometimes did, during which they would have ecstatic experiences and often find real psychological and even physical healing. These services were

lead by a wonderful man named Andrew David—he was a *twati,* for which there isn't any good English translation—the nearest I can come is "shaman" or "medicine man"—but the most important thing to say about him is that he was among the holiest people I've ever been privileged to know, a man who carried both spiritual power and a deep compassion for people and his community.

Then there is the so-called "Shaker" church (not to be confused with the Euro-American Shaker movement on the east coast), which combined elements of Catholic faith and ritual with native healing traditions. And the reservation had, and still has, active Baptist, Full Gospel, and Presbyterian churches, as well as a small Catholic church.

But I want to get back to my own story. I came to Warm Springs knowing myself as a stranger to the people and the culture—and, to be honest, intending to remain so. As I explained earlier, I meant simply to grab a few stories and haul

them back to my academic haunts at the university to write my dissertation. But I couldn't do it. For one thing, I found that winning the elders' trust to the point where they would share their stories with me, in their native language, took far longer than I had expected. They needed to have me live with them and their community a while before they'd let me hear, let along record, any of their closely-held traditions. But it wasn't just that that changed my whole way of being at Warm Springs—and my reason for staying. First off, as I said, I realized that to say anything meaningful about those stories I'd have to live in to that culture—even though it survived only fragmentarily—for some time. But my need to stay at Warm Springs, to give up my idea of grabbing something and running, came from more than just the exigencies of doing a passable dissertation. I realized there was much more for me there than just grist for a Ph.D. Almost from the beginning of my sojourn there I found something that called me to go deeper into the

life there than I could do simply as a passing stranger, an anthropological tourist—something of the spirit. There was something calling to me in the life of Warm Springs that I had to respond to. I think I have to admit that something of that was simple curiosity. Warm Springs was, and is, the most "foreign" place I've ever been—and I lived for a year in Europe, mostly in Germany but also in Switzerland—and neither of those was as different from all the places in the U.S. I've lived, from New York to Portland Oregon, as Warm Springs was. I wanted to penetrate beneath the surface of this strange culture, to find out what it was that made it so different. How did they function when their attitude towards time was so different from mine, when even in the tribal offices they did things according to a sense of when people were gathered and ready rather than by the clock? What were the webs of family relationships that played such a huge role in determining peoples' place in the community, the network of obligations

that so often took precedence over the demands of one's daily breadwinning occupation? What did it mean to be part of this community? And what was my place in it as an outsider—and yet not, the longer I stayed, not quite an outsider? What was the meaning of the great warmth and hospitality that people showed me, on the one hand, and the sense of something deep and hidden that I could never quite grasp on the other? This went, as even these questions should make clear, well beyond just religion, though religion was very much a part of it—Warm Springs had, and has, a spirituality that goes well beyond what happens at a longhouse or a church. It's all tied in with that sense of appropriate time and that web of relationships I mentioned just now, but also with a common history and a shared relationship with the land—not just the land on the reservation but the whole region along the Columbia where they fished and hunted and gathered roots and berries to sustain themselves—as indeed they still do. Land, history,

sustenance, community, family—all these things are an intimate though not easily discernible part of daily life at Warm Springs, embedded so deeply that they are difficult even for the people there to articulate. Together they create a home, a place of belonging both geographic and social, that binds place and people together more deeply than we can feel in our mobile California lifestyle.

And I think that's what drew me to stay on at Warm Springs, and led me to hope for what I finally received after a year and a half of living there—a job that not only kept me there but that enabled to enter more deeply than most outsider employees could do—as "Tribal linguist" seeking to help the community preserve and revive the native languages that, even then, only elders spoke. What I was seeking at Warm Springs was a sense of home, a sense of being rooted in place and community. A sense that, to some extent, I had never had.

I would sometimes long to hear Mount Hood singing to me that I was home.

Part of that sense of rootlessness must stem, in my case, from being, in fact, a first-generation American. My parents were born in the Ukraine and brought to this country as three-year-olds. Like many immigrants, they were eager to assimilate into the life of their adopted country, in the process casting off much of the culture they had previously lived by. I thus grew up not feeling entirely rooted in the US or in the East European Jewish tradition my family came from. Much of that was undoubtedly due to my own spiritual deafness, since I know that my parents never meant for me not to feel rooted in the Jewish tradition.

I know, though, that my longing for the sort of rootedness I saw at Warm Springs is hardly unique. I think it's common to most of us in this country. We simply aren't rooted to the land or to a particular community in the way that our

ancestors were. We're mobile, moving from place to place, geographically, professionally, socially, and spiritual, like the tumbleweed that I saw blowing across the expanse of eastern Oregon. Where do we find our roots?

I think it's here, with that question that so many of us are asking, with that longing that so many of us are feeling, that my Warm Springs experience meets what the Bible talks about when it talks of "strangers." The Biblical word is *ger*, plural *gerim*, often translated "sojourner." Now a "sojourner" in Biblical parlance is more than just a stranger or a visitor. A sojourner is one who lives in and lives into the life of the community of Israel, even if he or she never becomes fully a member of it. A sojourner works the soil, partakes of the fruits of the land, shares the Paschal lamb and participates in the Passover and the other festivals of Israel—and is guaranteed the protection of Israel and its God. And I, by committing myself to the life of Warm Springs, became more than a

stranger—I was a sojourner in the biblical sense, invited into the life, even the most intimate religious life, of that community—a privilege which is among the greatest I have ever received. I was, and am, rooted now in that territory around the Columbia River, even as I pursue my life now as a sojourner in the web of Silicon Valley freeways.

For there's more to the concept of "sojourner" in the Bible than just the designation of strangers joining with the community of Israel. In the Hebrew bible, the status of "sojourner" is something that belongs as well, in a very real sense, also to those born into Israel. Note what the text we read today says: welcome the sojourner, because you yourselves were sojourners. There's an implication there, at least, that the status of "sojourner" is something that the people of Israel never completely leave behind. And the New Testament takes up that theme. In the New Testament, *all* of us are "sojourners," living into a new community and a new

identity, because we have all become "strangers" to our former, unredeemed selves—to the strangers that in some sense we still are, enmeshed outwardly and often inwardly in a world that values possessions, status, and power as the highest goods—a world without roots, that lives its life on the move like tumbleweed. Only in the Kingdom of Heaven do we find our real rootedness, the real sense of home and community that we long for—Listen to Paul's words in Philippians: "Our citizenship"—our belonging to a community, our real rootedness—"is in heaven." And Paul doesn't mean just the heaven "by and by" when we die, but the community building the kingdom here and now. That's what we're at church for—that is what the church is meant to be. For me, my continuing "sojourn" at Warm Springs help me understand where my real roots are—roots I can find and feel even as I'm zooming down the freeway.

So let's get to it. Let's find in one another here in this church, here in Silicon Valley, here in this whole earth and galaxy and universe, and above all in our sisters and brothers—that is, all humanity—the rootedness we long for. The songs that draw us together are the songs of the Kingdom of God. Accepting ourselves and being accepted as sojourners, we find our true home even as we build it with one another. The mountains and the valleys, the rivers and the oceans, even the stars and the galaxies, are singing to us that we are not just at home—but that we are, as citizens of God's realm, the home itself that we long for. Let's get to being that home, for one another and for all those whom we bring to our door.