

Gathering and scattering

By [G. Kevin Baker](#)

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Samuel and Jesus have a lot in common. Both were dedicated to the Lord before birth; both were taken on religious pilgrimage by God-fearing parents ([Shiloh](#) and [Jerusalem](#)); and both spent all or part of their growing-up years among spiritual leaders in the community. Both Samuel and Jesus had mothers whose prayers were as poetic as they were prophetic (compare [Hannah's](#) to [Mary's](#)). Both were presented to the Lord at an early age (before [Eli](#) and [Simeon](#), respectively) and were destined to do great things for God.

The connections don't stop there: Samuel anointed King Saul and King David, starting a Davidic line that would culminate with the arrival of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah ("anointed one").

Yet what strikes me most in today's dialogue between 1 Samuel and Luke is the geographic movement. Both texts read like a travelogue: Elkanah and Hannah traveling to and from Shiloh, Joseph and Mary to and from Jerusalem (with a three-day search and rescue thrown into the mix). Movement, intentional movement, movement from hearth and home to religious centers of worship and back again. I don't think it is a coincidence that families making these kinds of treks on a regular basis become the raw material for the new and exciting things God is doing in the world.

In a recent [Theolog post](#), Will Willimon wrote about the importance of communal worship for those who profess to follow Jesus:

Who is a Christian? Someone who has not given up meeting together. That's not all that needs to be said about Christianity, but down through the ages we have no record of a single faithful disciple who refuses to gather with other fellow believers.

His opinion is countercultural today, when spirituality has become a private affair, one that provides a quick and easy way to dismiss human community with its real and irksome problems. People often make the case that Jesus was anti-institutional, that if he were incarnate today he would be in the streets and back alleys of contemporary society but nowhere near a worship gathering.

It is true that Jesus ate with sinners, touched lepers, conversed with women and disregarded the occasional sabbath practice. But he also was presented in the temple as a child, found in his [“Father’s house”](#) as an adolescent, and baptized at a riverside revival as an adult. He then embarked on an itinerate preaching ministry-- church could happen beside a lake or in an upper room.

Missiologists Robert Gallagher and Paul Hertig might call this geographic movement—this gathering for worship and scattering for service—[“the centripetal and centrifugal for mission.”](#) It is a pattern that continued as the early church gathered in prayer and worship and was thus equipped by the Holy Spirit to go into the world in love and service. The church gathered [around the Lord’s table](#) in the sacrament in order to become a [sacrament](#), a means of grace to the world.

It’s easy to sit back and criticize the institutional church; I have done it often enough myself. But I know better. Author Rose Macaulay captures both the problems and the promise of the church in her novel [The Towers of Trebizond](#). The narrator [describes](#) the church as a “wonderful and most extraordinary pageant of contradictions, and I, at least, want to be inside it, though it is foolishness to most of my friends.” I agree.

Today’s readings remind me that gathering for worship and being sent forth in mission animate the body of Christ, like inhaling and exhaling air. Where two are three are gathered in the Lord’s name, God only knows what will happen next. That’s why I still make the weekly pilgrimage, with my kids in tow.