

Sermon, Proper 16B, August 22, 2021, Jane A. Beebe

“Happy are the people whose strength is in you!
whose hearts are set on the pilgrims' way.

Those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs,
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.” (Psalm 84:4-5)

In praying the readings for this week, it struck me what a wonderful alignment there is between the Psalm and the Gospel reading. Both point us to where we ultimately dwell, where we abide. Psalm 84 is so beautiful it isn't hard to remember that the Psalms are actually songs. Some translations of the opening verse have, “How lovely is your dwelling place...” (NIV), or even, “How amiable are thy tabernacles...” (KJV) However, one commentary suggests that what makes the Temple dear to the Psalmist is a “...powerful longing to enjoy the aura of God's presence...” (Alter, Robert. *The Book of Psalms: a Translation and Commentary*, p. 297) The Psalmist truly seeks the “living God.” (Psalm 84:1) This longing is so deep that the Psalmist is envious of the sparrows and swallows that make their nests in the crevices of the Temple stonework. Even one day employed as a lowly doorkeeper at the Temple is “...better than a thousand in my own room.” (Psalm 84:9)

Psalm 84 may reflect the experience of making a pilgrimage to a temple festival, especially its joy. (Brueggemann, Walter. *Psalms* (p. 364). We can all think of ourselves as pilgrims, whether we journey within our hearts, or whether

we actually walk along a physical road. We can bring others along with us, again by simply holding them in our hearts in prayer, or by literally walking alongside them. The Psalmist suggests that blessings abound when we travel together—especially when we rejoice that our destination is God’s dwelling. Even when we are desolated—or maybe especially when we are desolated—we will find springs of water. When the Temple is reached the pilgrims will receive God’s grace and behold God’s glory, thus transforming the journey into a sacramental act.

The first chapter of John has these astounding words: “The Word became flesh and lived among us.” (John 1:14) Some translations have “dwelled among us.” The Greek literally means “to erect a tent.” God both inhabits our dwelling places and, at the same time, is that dwelling place itself. God is the object of our longing, yet also the place where that longing is assuaged. It is hard in modern times to convey the scandal of Jesus’ assertion that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood. To drink the blood of animals was prohibited. Jesus was making concrete and visceral the life-giving reality that he will abide in us, and that we can then abide in him. Later in John Jesus says, “I came that [you] may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) Yet to acknowledge our need and longing for God may make us feel vulnerable. How will we answer Jesus’ question: “Do you also wish to go away?” (John 6:67)

I think we hear the same longing for God expressed in Psalm 84 in Peter's voice when he answers Jesus with, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life..." (John 6:68) The Word made flesh. Peter understands and accepts the truth of Jesus' words: "Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me." (Jesus 6:57) Hidden in these words is the power and inevitability of the Resurrection.

Three summers ago I spent some time on the west coast of Scotland, ending up on the Isle of Iona. I was able to stay at Bishop's House, an Anglican retreat house established at the end of the 19th century, and originally entrusted to the Society of St. John the Evangelist. I was drawn to the rocks and the sea certainly. I managed to see puffins flying into the sides of the Isle of Staffa where they nest. (Perhaps it is that image so like that of the sparrows in our Psalm that brought this memory to mind). I also came to see the Abbey of Iona. Columba came to Iona from Ireland in a boat with twelve companions, arriving on Pentecost in 563 AD. The monastery he established helped to spread Christianity, not just in Scotland, but in northern England and Europe. The Isle of Iona became a place of pilgrimage from the 7th century on, attracting artists and manuscript illuminators. The Book of Kells, an extraordinary illuminated Gospel book in Latin, was possibly created there. It was taken to Ireland during the Viking raids in the 9th century.

None of the original buildings remain intact; a Benedictine abbey was established on the site in 1200 AD. It is that Abbey that may be explored today. I was lucky enough to attend an ecumenical Communion service there one evening. I was moved to be in a place where services had been held for so many centuries. There are many extraordinary things to see within the Abbey and on its grounds. I remember being particularly drawn to a large sculpture of Columba in one of the Abbey transepts. Most of the original sculpture is gone; only the feet remain. A modern sculpture of wire was erected over the feet. Somehow the modern addition serves to highlight those stone feet. They seemed to embody the idea of pilgrimage itself. The body has been reimagined and renewed, yet the original feet remain, still connected to the ground. I thought of that beautiful aria based on Romans 10:15 from Handel's *Messiah*: "How beautiful are the feet..."

When I came to Iona, my sense of being on pilgrimage was not fully formed. I needed rest after a long slog in seminary while working full time. Every so often I find I *have* carried something with me from that place: images such as that sculpture come into my mind. However, I find that I still need that sense of pilgrimage, of being in motion toward something, something lovely, something alive.

Iona—and other pilgrimage sites—are sometimes referred to as "thin places." They are places in the physical world where heaven and earth seem to

have come near each other. One can catch a glimpse of the eternal. Perhaps my daily walks are partly an expression of that longing to come close to that which abides. On one level they help me maintain health and sanity. They remind me to keep my feet on the ground. With it being so buggy this time of year, to be honest, sometimes I just try to get through it! Still, often there is something more I receive, even if I think I am merely flailing around, not really seeing. A few days ago it was a sprinkle of rain. My glasses got smeary, yet the coolness was refreshing. The renewed sweetness of the air felt like a blessing. I felt alive.

*Dear God,
Be thou a bright flame before me,
Be thou a guiding star above me,
Be thou a smooth path below me,
Be thou a kindly shepherd behind me.
Today—tonight—and forever.
—St. Columba of Iona, AD 521-597*