

Sermon, Advent 3C, December 16, 2018, Jane A. Beebe

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” (Philippians 4:6)

There is a wonderfully comforting prayer by St. Augustine in our prayer book, often said at the end of Evening Prayer or Compline:

“Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night, and give your angels charge over those who sleep. Tend the sick, Lord Christ; give rest to the weary, bless the dying, soothe the suffering, pity the afflicted, shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. *Amen.*”

I love the way it seems to embrace all who would most need prayers at the end of the day. I had been a postulant for holy orders less than a year when Bishop Doug was elected the 9th bishop of our diocese. He was consecrated in December. I was delighted to learn that I and my fellow postulants were to serve as acolytes and torch-bearers for the service. (Jose Reyes was the crucifer). I also received an invitation to attend the celebratory dinner the night before that was held at the Basketball Hall of Fame in Springfield—a really interesting venue for an Episcopal event! There is a digital display in the dome of the main hall that probably usually shows ads and basketball-related announcements. For our event, however, it displayed: “Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep this night...” And it went around, and around, and around...

For some reason, the phrase, “Shield the joyous...” has always intrigued me. Why would it be that the joyous are in particular need of shielding? The scripture readings today sound the same theme. They exhort us to, “Rejoice and exult with all our heart(s)... [because] “God will rejoice over us with gladness... and renew us in his love”, and even “...exult over us with loud singing. “Rejoice always...”; “Shout aloud and sing for joy, O royal Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel.” The preface in the Eucharistic prayers usually begins, “It is a right, and a good, and a joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to you...”

Perhaps the joyous are to be shielded because joy, specifically the joy we feel in God’s presence, is precious, and not necessarily easily come by. We are in the third week of Advent and have lit the rose-colored candle. The light is increasing. Soon this will be reflected in Creation in the northern hemisphere, when light gradually begins to increase again. This season can be a dark time for some, and we need to acknowledge that. All the more reason to, “Let your gentleness be known to everyone.” The Lord—quite literally—is near.

My mother used to say laughter in church is a bit of “free grace.” This joy that comes from the presence of God is the very essence of grace. It is not something that can be controlled or willed into being. This joy is not necessarily loud and raucous, but can come quietly and unobtrusively. Joy is a deeper spiritual state, I think, than mere surface happiness. It can be experienced sometimes even

in the midst of pain or sorrow. Joy has its own life and vibrancy. It is not a solution to a problem. When it does come to us, it makes sense to shield it like a candle flame.

One of the ways we can “trim our wicks”, so to speak is through prayer. Advent is a short season and so easily overtaken by all the concerns of 21st-century life. Still, Advent can be an opportunity to take a breath, to breathe in God’s peace. My own experience of prayer has grown and changed over time. I hesitate to claim that there has been a continuing deepening. The life of prayer does not seem to follow an arc. Perhaps this is because prayer comes as grace and is not something that can be “achieved” or possessed. I have spent some time trying to find language not only for the experience of prayer itself (always inadequate!) but also how a life of prayer, like our liturgical year, seems to have seasons.

The “seasons” of prayer may or may not correspond to the seasons of our lives. Sometimes a particular mode of prayer may be fruitful for a long time. But changes are inevitable. We experience death, loss, illness, and aging. New joys can be just as disruptive. It may become difficult to stay attuned to God’s voice. It can require patience, courage and openness to allow new ways of praying, of being in relationship to God, to emerge.

Prayer seems to be about relationship. It also seems to be about presence. Without putting limits on how God shows up in our lives, I can say that I have

experienced God both as loving Friend and Teacher. I also experience God as Presence itself and thus available in all of creation. But we are all wired differently. We can never know everything about God. Why not share with each other the sacred conversations we have had?

To think of prayer as something that gets one to a destination – or is the destination itself – denies all the ways one is already there. And yet, paradoxically and mysteriously one can deepen in prayer through pilgrimage. Pilgrimage could be as simple as becoming re-attuned to one’s surrounding landscape. It is helpful to walk along with someone. Prayer itself can become a kind of landscape, akin to deserts, mountains, or seas. Jesus seemed drawn to all three. Prayer gives us life, but it is also *where* we live. By describing these different “terrains” to each other, whether in the natural world or in an inner landscape, we can become more adventurous in our journeys with God. We can also learn from each other where places of rest exist, how to allow our spirits to land gently as birds land on waves or sand.

So far, we have had the prophets at their most exultant, and Paul at his most gentle and pastoral. However, there is another voice calling out in this landscape. There is another aspect to joy—perhaps *especially* the joy experienced in prayer—and that is its fierceness. I was ordained on the feast of the nativity of John the Baptist. Therefore, I feel compelled to listen to what he has to say, vipers and all.

Here's the thing about prayer: it is not always a comfortable experience. It takes courage to pray, "Thy will be done." It takes courage to open ourselves to inner transformation. Steps six and seven of the Twelve Steps speak to this. It takes steps one through five to get there. You could say steps six and seven are at the heart of the "program." Once we get there, we acknowledge that we are entirely ready to have God remove the defects of character we have admitted to in step five. Then we humbly ask God to remove our shortcomings. Implicit in our asking is our trust in God. As Isaiah says, "Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid..." (Isaiah 12:2) This is what I hear when John says, "His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (Luke 3:17)

Yes, John's language is fierce. Yet the thing to notice is that the winnowing fork is in Jesus' hand. It is Jesus who removes the chaff from the grains of wheat. Chaff is the protective covering around cereal grains. It has a purpose. It is only that its removal is necessary for the grain to be usable. And how wonderful that John uses the image of grain. Seeds, and grain, and bread are used over and over by Jesus in his parables and teaching. Unquenchable fire