

Proper 16b; 23 August, 2009
I Kings 8:1,6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43; Ps. 84
Eph 6:10-20; John 6:56-69

Almost every tradition has a Holy Way, a pilgrim path walked by those who seek God. In Rome, people climb the marble steps of the Lateran on their knees, steps which are said to have been moved from Jerusalem, where Christ climbed them to go to Pilate for judgment. In Hawaii, it is the crater of Haleakala, where ancient Hawaiians believed that the sun was born each day. They would climb the mountain in darkness and wait for the sun to gleam through the mists of the crater beneath them. Muslims are required to go to Mecca one time in their lives, if they can possibly afford it. In Jerusalem, it's the Way of the Cross: a literal re-tracing of the steps Jesus walked from Gethsemane to Calvary, ending in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. At Christ Church, perhaps it is the center aisle, which our new Christians journey from altar to font, and all of us walk to receive the sacrament of grace, and every member traces one more time as he or she is laid to rest.

These pilgrim paths are spatial representations of our inward journey, the one which takes us to God. When King Solomon had finished building the Temple in Jerusalem, years of labor in dressed stone and carved cedar and bronze and gold, he gathered all the people together and prayed in their hearing: “ But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!” (I Kings 8:27) At the moment of his triumph, even as the glory of the Lord fills the Temple so that the priests cannot even enter to do their work, Solomon draws attention to the inadequacy of his offering: no mere building can house God, but only, as we now know, the human heart. When we walked or were carried to the waters of baptism, when the clean water was sprinkled on our heads, that's what happened to us: we were filled with

the glory of God, so that everything in us could only bow down and greet it. And from that day, we have been on pilgrimage, seeking the one by whom we have already been found.

When Christ sent his disciples out for the first time, he told them: “Take nothing for your journey, no staff, nor bag, nor bread, nor money—not even an extra tunic.” (Luke 9:3) For this trip, you will need nothing that you think you do: not a means of defense, not stuff, not clothing, not even food or money. You need these for your everyday living, but they will not help you find God or the people of God. To find them, you need another set of baggage entirely: truth and righteousness, gladness in peace, faith, the gift of salvation, and the Holy Spirit -- all the things God gives you at the beginning; you need only remember them to find them.

The psalm we read (and sing) today shows us the way, the pilgrim path. We begin with desire: wonder, curiosity, the yearning to be made free or whole, a yearning so strong that it impels our heart and our flesh to undertake the disciplines of the spirit. Like young people in love, we begin by thinking that we will do anything to stay with this Jesus forever. We recognize in Christ our home: our nest where we may raise our children, the small, safe place where we can meet our God. And so we set our hearts on the pilgrim’s way, and immediately we fall into difficulty. Even in the physical world, we cannot go from one mountain to another without venturing down into valleys, low places where we are vulnerable to attack and from which we cannot see the horizon. Maybe we have seen people of faith commit injustice, and we question whether we wish to belong to such people. Maybe we have encountered grief we cannot endure. Maybe our understanding of God crumbles to dust and we have to wait for a better one before we can continue. And yet, the psalmist promises that if we keep going through the desolate valleys, if we do not turn aside for other things, they will yet be places of fruitful growth,

“for the early rains have covered [them] with pools of water.” (Ps 84:5) At the moment of our baptism, in the love we learn at our parents’ breast, there are deep wells of living water planted in our spirit, places of deep wholeness which can well up to sustain us when everything else falls away. There is no power like the memory and living presence of love.

But the pilgrim road is not an easy path. Anyone who has ever climbed to the summit of a mountain knows that peaks bring views of great beauty, but it takes *work* to get there! It requires us to confront, not flesh and blood, but what St. Paul calls “the rulers,... the authorities, ...the cosmic powers of this present darkness,...the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.” (Eph 6:12) We don’t use language like this much in the Episcopal Church, and I suspect that many of you are not comfortable with such words. We prefer words like “childhood resentments” and “unhealed trauma” and “learned patterns of defensiveness” and “the unintegrated portions of the self.” In other words, we like to think of evil, when we must, as if it is entirely within people, a psychological force which can impel us to do wrong when we are not on guard, but which has no independent existence in the world of spirits. This understanding has a certain power; it prevents us from evading responsibility for our own actions, bars us from saying “The devil made me do it” when really we should be saying, “I wanted to do it, and did,” or “I didn’t want to, and did it anyway.”

But I am not sure that St. Paul intended us to hear it only that way. The Bible reveals pretty clearly that its authors thought there were evil spirits; when the Egyptian magicians call upon their deities to replicate the miracles of Moses, they can do it, up to a point, and Christ himself spent much of his ministry conducting exorcisms. St. Augustine wavered between two understandings of evil: that it was a force active and powerful in the world, and that it was sheer nothingness, the absolute absence of God. Perhaps we can find an image in what we know of black

holes, the things that can remain when a star has disintegrated: there is nothing discernable there, and yet they exert a nearly-irresistible force. Just so, in the spiritual life, there are shadows, things that exist where goodness used to be. They draw us toward them with a real magnetism, attracting us to destructiveness, hatred, selfishness, and division. They suggest to us that our God is weak, or is only one of many, or that our neighbor isn't worth our love. They invert our beliefs, turn the truth upside-down, and tempt us to stray in our journey.

If there were no shadow of death, the spiritual journey would be easy. It would be a simple romp through a green field on a pleasant summer day. But St. Paul uses the imagery of warfare: "take up the whole armor of Christ,...the belt,...the breastplate,...the shield,...the helmet,...the sword." (Eph 6:14-17) He is not talking about crusade, or conquest, or combat with people who profess a different faith. He is talking about spiritual warfare, the hard work of turning ourselves, again and again, toward Christ, toward peace. Oscar Romero, the martyred Archbishop of San Salvador, said, "The violence we preach is not the violence of the sword, the violence of hatred. It is the violence of love, of brotherhood, the violence that wills to beat weapons into sickles for work."¹ The Bible has two mirrored verses, of which we often remember only one. Isaiah prophesies that there shall be a reign of peace when we shall beat swords into ploughshares (Isaiah 2:4), but Joel urges us to beat ploughshares into swords until the time of oppression and exile is past (Joel 3:10). I suspect that the images are the same: whatever makes for fruitfulness, whatever brings forth life, is both true birth of peace and the only weapon which can end evil.

We open our mouths and sing, "How lovely is thy dwelling-place, O Lord of Hosts to me!" -- and there are few more dangerous words in any language. If we believed those words, if we took them seriously and lived by them, we would be

¹ November 27, 1977, trans. James R. Brockman, found in *The Violence of Love*, epigraph.

unable to discard or defile any of the dwelling-places of God: not Creation, sustained by God's breath; not other Christians, not any of them, not even the ones whose understanding of Christ we cannot see; not unbelievers, the strangers whom God called into being; not even ourselves and the deep places of our heart which frighten us, but where we can go to meet God. If we took these words seriously, we would work to sustain the purity of our air and water and land. If we took these words seriously, we would build bridges with other people, take to the streets against violence, feed strangers, seek good even in people who might wish us harm. If we took these words seriously, we would persist in prayer, coming faithfully even in dry times when God seems not to hear, trusting that there will be comfort again, and delight, when we are able to hear it. These are the places where we stand at the threshold of God's house, a thousand and again a thousand altars, shining like stars in a dark night.

At the end of Christ's discourse on his flesh and blood, most of his followers leave him, the thronging multitudes who sought him out for bread or healing or a break from the monotony of their lives. Jesus is left along with the twelve, and he asks them, "Do you also wish to go away?" (John 6:67) Peter does not say, "no." He may very well wish to go away. He may very well be shaken by the fact that everyone else has deserted this savior he thinks he sees. He, too, may well be frightened by what Christ is asking of him. But he responds with a simple truth, the very truth of our lives: we live as pilgrims, or we squander our days "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68) Amen.

