

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 16) – Year B – August 26, 2009 - Homily
1 Kings 8: [1, 6, 10-11] 22-30, 41-43; Psalm 84; Ephesians 6:10-20; John 6:56-69
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John Bunyan's classic tale *The Pilgrim's Progress* was first published in 1678. It inspired Percy Dearmer to write one of the most delightful hymns of *The Hymnal 1982*; one I think we are all familiar with. The words of the first verse read, "He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster, let him in constancy follow the Master. There's no discouragement shall make him once relent his first avowed intent to be a pilgrim." Our Psalm for this evening is also about a pilgrim's journey. The evidence suggests that it was written as a song for pilgrims making their way to Jerusalem for the festival of Sukkot, just before the start of the winter rainy season. Sukkot is also known as the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles. For our Jewish brothers and sisters, it has both a historical and agricultural significance. Historically, it commemorates the forty-year period during which the children of Israel wandered in the desert, living in temporary shelters. Agriculturally, Sukkot is a harvest festival.

The Psalm then is quite timely to the onset of the fall season and our own preparations against the coming winter months. The time is always right for spiritual growth as we journey on the road to holiness, and draw closer to God in Christ Jesus. So tonight, let's consider some of the challenges we face as pilgrims on the way and in the Way. In that respect, the Psalmist, Bunyan, and Dearmer all give us some great insights. From the Psalm we read, "My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh rejoice in the living God." Even though faith is a gift of God, we can be sure that everyone has the seeds of such a longing for the Lord planted by God in their hearts. God will continue to knock on the door of our hearts throughout our whole life, until we open the door to that chamber, and decide whether to accept the gift of faith or not. It is always the first step on the journey. Bunyan describes the beginning of his journey as being shown the gate and seeing the light in the dark. Jesus is the gate, through which all God's children must walk. Jesus is the Light of the world.

Our Psalmist describes God's anointed King as Israel's defender. The king of our hearts is our Lord Jesus. But remember that we would not need a defender if there was not trouble or enemies against whom we must defend ourselves. It's no surprise that the world is in strife, given that we are surrounded by the consequences of humanity's sin. Bunyan's lead character, aptly named Christian, struggles with despondency, fear and mistrust. We all do. These are the giants that we wrestle with in the darkness of the night, and even in the cold light of day. We often don't know the source – our own sins, the sins of others, or perhaps those who work for evil in the world – but we do know that prayer can and does help. In the second verse of our hymn it says, "Who so beset him round with dismal stories, do but themselves confound, his strength the more is. No foes shall stay his might, though he with giants fight; he will make good his right to be a pilgrim." Our hope is not just for the future, but also that we might live the promise by living a resurrection life today. While we are in the world, our faith will always be challenged. As the letter from Ephesians tells us, we must be strong in the Lord and the strength of His power to withstand the wiles of the devil.

There are desolate valleys along the path of salvation as well. The one found in Psalm 84 may be the Valley of Rephaim, where the baobab trees grow. In 2 Samuel 5:22-24, we learn that the Philistines controlled the Valley of Rephaim, and that David routed them there, as it is written, according to God's will. In our spiritual lives, we have all walked through desolate

valleys. They are the places where it seems very dark in the shadow of the mountains that oppress us. Whatever those mountains are in our lives: the stress of work or relationships, unresolved issues of all kinds, addictions or abuses, money or marital problems, the list could go on. Yet the Psalmist has good news for us, “those who go through the desolate valley will find it a place of springs”. How can that be, when it seems so dry? It is always by God’s grace. We carry the treasure within, and as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” The good news is that we don’t have to live in any kind of shadowy wilderness. Even when it feels like we might die of thirst, we need only ask for the Living Water, and we too will be refreshed, and find ourselves strengthened.

Giving the glory to God in all things is the best antidote to our prideful ways. Bunyan describes it as Christian’s suffering at the Vanity Fair “where all kinds of worthless things are sold”. When we get sucked into the world’s stuff, there is no better time to focus on the words of verse 11 of the Psalm that say, “No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk with integrity”. When we put the Lord first, God graciously and generously provides for our needs, and guards our hearts against the false longings that lead us into idolatry. With God’s help, we can conquer the yearnings of the flesh and the world around us. We don’t have to get tied up with consumerism’s glitz or glamour, or with the latest fads. On a personal note, I’ve found it much easier to resist the consumer trap and temptations since we no longer subscribe to cable TV. There is a reason for all those advertisements – they work!

Finally, according to biblical scholar, Bernhard Anderson, “the poet envies the birds that find security in the Temple... and exclaims that even one day spent in the Temple courts is better than a thousand spent elsewhere.” This reflects God’s peace, which encompasses the cessation of war, and a deep sustaining knowledge of our safety and security in the hope of salvation through Jesus Christ. It also reflects that yearning to be in God’s presence that is found in Paul’s writings and in the Book of Revelations. What is it then that spoils our joy and our constant praise of the Lord in this life? Perhaps it is something about the realities and challenges of daily life and work that have a way of dousing us with cold water, and stealing our joy. When that happens, it’s a good time to open our hearts to God and hear the Spirit’s gentle reminder that we are already filled with the constant and steadfast love of the Lord’s presence through the indwelling Holy Spirit. And if our joy is not always apparent, we are invited again and again to come away and rest in God’s power and strength, drawing deeply from that unending well of goodness and love. Or as our hymnist tells us, “Since, Lord, thou dost defend us with thy Spirit, we know we at the end shall life inherit. Then fancies flee away; I’ll fear not what men say, I’ll labor night and day to be a pilgrim.” In Christ, our wandering is purposeful and intentional, not aimless. In the Lord, we know where our home is. God is nearer to us than a heartbeat away. Let the journey continue, and may God bless us all on the way.

Amen.