

**Homily, St. Andrew's
Proper 21B, Aug 23, 2015
Psalm 84**

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

After some time away to learn, to visit family, to rest and to play, it is good to be back, to be home in Calgary and home here at St. Andrew's. I like to travel and I really like being out in the wilderness of "our" Rocky mountains as well as wildernesses further away. I think my favourite place is down in Waterton, where I spent my last week of holidays. In case you don't know, Waterton is the "poor cousin" National Park to Banff. It's tucked away in the far southwest corner of the province such that you can day hike to both the US and British Columbia, though not necessarily in the same day. I have been making a pilgrimage there almost every year for the past 9, because the Diocese of Calgary has a cabin on the lake available for clergy to rent at reasonable cost. It didn't start as a place of pilgrimage for me, but after the first year or 2 of holidaying there, I fell in love with the place... the town, the cabin, the lake and the surrounding mountains... everything about it. It is a place where I find peace and joy, rest, recreation and comfort year after year amidst the beauty and wildness.

Earlier in my holiday, I read the book "Wild" by Cheryl Strayed, that was also made into a movie this past spring. It is the story of her journey, a kind of pilgrimage, along the Pacific Crest Trail through California and Oregon, ending at a bridge called "The Bridge of the Gods" at the Oregon-Washington border. She embarks on the journey seeking healing, peace and strength after her life has been terribly off the rails for more than 4 years. She doesn't know how it might work, but she somehow feels compelled to hike more than a thousand miles in roughly 100 days, trekking, in her words, "across deserts and snow, past trees and bushes and grasses and flowers of all shapes and sizes and colours, [walking] up and down mountains and over fields and glades and stretches of land I couldn't possibly define, except to say that I had been there, passed over it, and made it through." (5)

One of the key moments in the journey comes after 38 days on the trail, not even half-way, when during a rest stop, she removes her hiking boots to rub her sore feet and one of the boots accidentally gets knocked off the steep mountain path, falling irretrievably into the wilderness below. The initial shock of the loss has barely passed when she throws her remaining, now useless boot, to join its mate, and then, she wrote: "I looked north, in [the direction of the Bridge of the Gods] - the very thought of that bridge a beacon to me. I looked south, to where I'd been, to the wild land that had schooled and scorched me, and considered my options. There was only one, I knew. There was always only one. To keep walking." (6) The desire to find whatever she was seeking, the longing to be found, the pull of the pilgrimage, won out every time she faced a new challenge or encountered another obstacle. Every time, she just kept walking.

Our assigned psalm today, Psalm 84, is commonly described as a pilgrimage psalm - a poem that may have even been recited or sung by pilgrims travelling to the Temple in Jerusalem, likely for one of the major pilgrimage feasts. Mirroring the journey of the pilgrim, the psalm itself follows a kind of journey from longing to fulfilment. It begins with a sense of deep

longing: “How dear to me is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord...” As we read it, we can sense the psalmist’s longing to be in the courts of the Lord pulsating through every fibre of his being. It’s like Cheryl Strayed’s desire for healing and peace, her longing to be found out of her lost-ness, even if her desire was not clearly understood or consciously focused on God.

What Strayed did understand was that her yearning was about something other than simply getting life right. Like the desire of the psalmist, Strayed’s longing resembles the “Holy Longing” writer Ron Rolheiser describes in his book of the same name. The basis of spirituality, Rolheiser contends, is a “dis-ease” - a deep restlessness - energy looking for a place to go - that we can’t always put our finger on but something that we often search for in what we think is the right set of circumstances - the right job, the right family, the right relationship, the right hobby, or one of my favourites: the right balance between work and play. We work for life to be right such that the longing of our hearts will be fulfilled. But none of these ‘right’ circumstances really get at the longing, for it is about something else. It is about something spiritual, something sacred. It is about our connection to our own soul and to the soul and spirit of the Divine. It is about God.

The pilgrimage to the Temple described by the psalmist does not follow an easy road and yet it is a way of happiness: “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. They will climb from height to height, and the God of gods will reveal himself in Zion.” The pilgrim finds happiness in the journey, with hardships transformed into moments of grace, in part because of the confidence that the goal represents ultimate happiness - communion with God represented by being present in the Temple, as described in the first of the beatitudes in the psalm: “Happy are they who dwell in your house! They will always be praising you.” Dwelling with God, communion with God, is the ultimate fulfillment that makes the journey and every experience along the way - the difficult and the delightful - worth the effort.

The critical element that makes the spiritual practice of pilgrimage into a sacramental act is the transformation that occurs through physicality. In the practice of pilgrimage, one literally and physically journeys, walks one’s way, through a transformation. Done with an open heart and seeking spirit, it is a physical act that becomes a means of God’s grace. The journey is an outward and physical sign of an inward and spiritual grace. Strayed experiences this even though she never has much of a concept of God. She consciously sets out with a desire for emotional and mental healing, but then she notices early on in her journey that pretty much all of her time and energy is focused on her most basic needs and physical pain... her battered feet, her utter exhaustion, her hunger, the heat and cold and wet in their turn, and her sore muscles. But the desire, the dis-ease, that had her set out in the first place, gives her the courage and conviction to just keep walking... walking in faith that healing and grace and love would come, somehow, through it.

After climbing from height to height, a shift comes in Psalm 84 as the poet offers a prayer and petition: “Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer...” And then the psalm reaches its conclusion, describing a longing fulfilled and a transformation complete: “For one day in your courts is better than a thousand in my own room, and to stand at the threshold of the house of my God

than to dwell in the tents of the wicked. For the Lord God is both sun and shield; he will give grace and glory; No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk with integrity. O Lord of hosts, happy are they who put their trust in you!" The longing that had the pilgrim set out in the first place comes to fulfilment with the understanding that trusting in the Lord is the locus of ultimate happiness.

The irony is that in setting out on the journey at all, the pilgrim's heart was already living this truth. But the point and the importance of the pilgrimage was to make real, to physically live out the spiritual truth of finding happiness by putting one's trust in God alone. By literally walking in the strength of God, both in terms of inner confidence and determination and the physical energy to complete the arduous physical journey to Jerusalem, or the Bridge of the Gods, or Waterton, to whatever holy place one seeks - in the journey, the fulness of God is experienced in a new way. Happiness is having the heart of a pilgrim, being willing to set out on a difficult journey, being willing to risk and to seek. Happiness is being a faithful follower of God, finding refuge in God... and finally trusting in God for life itself. Arriving at the Temple, standing at the threshold of the house of God, is symbolic of being in such full communion with God. It is a communion hard fought through many days of striving and seeking on each day's walk and yet a communion that was always available, always there, right from the beginning.

At the end of Strayed's journey, after arriving at the Bridge of the Gods, she wonders what it all might mean. She doesn't know what her life will bring next but as she lives into it, she discovers that she had indeed been found. At the time, she writes, "it was enough to trust that what I'd done was true. To understand its meaning without yet being able to say precisely what it was..." (311) The journey had shown her the love and mercy of strangers who quickly became friends and it helped her to settle into herself, into the woman she was meant to become.

May we live into this same spirit of pilgrimage here at St. Andrew's. May we experience a dis-ease in our spirits such that our desire and longing for deeper communion with God compels us to set out on a journey of discovery in concrete and physical ways. May we risk and seek and when unexpected troubles come, may we just keep walking on, into the unknown future, trusting in God for all that leads to life.