

A sermon by Stephanie Haskins
August 23, 2009

“Home Song”
Psalm 84

Five years ago this summer, I went on a pilgrimage to Taizé, France, and if I remember anything from that time, it was that I never thought of home so often. Looking back, perhaps that should not have been as surprising as it was. I was always the kid who got homesick at sleep-away camp in Okoboji, who experienced acute separation anxiety at the prospect of an hour away from my mom while she was trying to attend worship. (I was too young at the time to fully grasp the promptness of Lutherans). It’s not that I lacked imagination, and my sense of adventure was huge—but it was largely confined to books. My twin sister was the rough-and-tumble one, the girl who took the first step and the girl who first learned to ride a bike without my dad behind her, guiding her with his hands. I was the observer, the social butterfly, and the smart aleck, who could not be bothered with such trivial things like learning how to tie my shoes. “That’s what’s Velcro is for,” I remember telling my parents.

Many years later, when I decided to go on a pilgrimage alone to France after my first tumultuous year of seminary, I had my doubts. First of all, there was the plane ride. Planes are fine things themselves, but the prospect of flying over water did not, well, float my boat. I’m a little scared of sharks, which is an embarrassingly deep-seated fear, probably resulting from seeing the movie “Jaws” at an impressionable age. Assuming that I arrived safely in Paris, there was the minor problem that I could not speak French and I understood even less. This was acceptable at restaurants, where I could point and grunt at the menu, but less helpful at the train station, where my French conversational skills broke down like a train gone off the tracks.

When I finally arrived at Taizé¹, a little monastic community nestled in the rolling hills of France’s Burgundy region, I felt relieved that I had arrived but not sure what that really meant. Luckily, since Taizé is a religious community and not a resort, there was a schedule, made up of what you might expect: lots of worship, prayer, talking about prayer, rest, work, eating and then more prayer. The rhythm of life quickly overtook me and the other hundreds of young pilgrims who left their ipods at home to encounter God in a sleepy French village. At first, worship three times a day seemed a bit much, even for a churchy person like me. But after a few days, going to worship morning, noon, and night (literally) came to feel as natural as breathing in and out. With time on my hands and no piece of electronic

equipment to distract me, I stared evening after evening at the same improbable moon (how could it be the same moon?) and I thought of home.

At first I thought of my comfortable bed, but then I thought about my parents, my sister, my brother. I thought about my friends, mentors, and the friends who were like family. During the second week of my moonlight vigil, I realized with no shortage of irony that I felt closer to some of those people in the middle of France than I did when we occupied the same room at home. On my last night in Paris I turned my TV to a local news channel to see if I could finally understand any French words. I still couldn't; but I recognized the shape of Louisiana on the screen. Hurricane Katrina had just passed through New Orleans, where the levees had buckled under the weight of the storm's rain. Perched on my hotel bed, I watched houses on the TV disappear under water, and the newly homeless take up residence in a football dome. It's a strange and fragile thing, home is.

This morning's scripture, psalm 84, is a considerable departure from weeks past. This summer we followed King David through his many rises and falls. Last week he died an elderly man and his son Solomon took over the family business, which is when we left the story. But this psalm, as with all others, is attributed to David, and so there is something fitting that our next scriptural step after David's story is a song, in the spirit of the songs that he composed during his life.

The psalms can be difficult to get a handle on. A psalm can seem like a desert island oasis—beautiful but remote. They do not require embellishment as much as context. Most scholars think psalm 84 was composed as a hymn for pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem to visit the temple, the place where the Lord God lived.ⁱⁱ They would have sung it while they walked, like an ancient equivalent of “99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall,” that classic song of the long car ride, but with much more theological depth and poetic resonance.

In psalm 84 the pilgrim anticipates the end of her journey and the bliss she will experience when she arrives at her destination. We know this because of the detail in language. The word “lovely” in “How lovely is your dwelling place” (v. 1) is the only “lovely” in the entire Hebrew Bible used to describe an inanimate object. That same Hebrew word usually describes people and is most consistently translated as “beloved.”ⁱⁱⁱ In other words, the sacredness of the temple is so great that the pilgrim loves it with the passion of a lover.

And why would she not love this place? “Even the sparrow finds a home,” she notes, “and the swallow a nest” (v. 3). The smallest of God's creatures find protection and the comforts of home. Of course, while the birds are nesting, other animals are burnt as sacrifices in the fires of Yahweh's altars. But let's not get too hung up on the details. The pilgrim knows that even a day in this temple is worth

more than “a thousand elsewhere.” To be a doorkeeper, a job without much status in the eyes of the world, is transformed in the temple context to be positively posh. Deacons, take note. This is our psalmist’s shout-out to you.

And have you noticed how happy the pilgrim is? She says so, time and again. “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise” (v. 4). “Happy are those whose strength is in you, [God], in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (v. 5). “O Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in you” (v. 12). When was the time you felt that happy about going home or to church or to anywhere else, for that matter? Fully alive with anticipation, the kid at Christmas feeling, like you just couldn’t wait to step through the doors?

If that feeling seems like a distant memory, don’t worry. You’re in good company. With fall approaching and all the busyness that the season entails, we often end up dragging ourselves from place to place, thinking about what just happened or what comes next, anything but the place we find ourselves at that moment. Even going to church can feel labor-intensive—getting the kids up for Matins or Sunday School or attending yet another board meeting. We call this place our church home—but that association can be a mixed bag, in part because sometimes the church feels just as busy as home. The staff had their annual retreat this past week, and after reviewing the calendar of events for the year, I think most of us would like a month-long nap just to prepare ourselves.

But somewhere, deep down inside, we all know that church, and life, shouldn’t have to be this way. Life isn’t just about surviving: making it to the next meeting, the next paycheck, the next football practice or the next the day. Difficult economic times make it even clearer that life is, or at least should also be about thriving, flourishing. This is what God wants for us. And this is what we want for ourselves, when we slow down long enough to listen.

When we’re at our best as a church we understand that all of our programs are not to help us build a stronger spiritual résumé, but to orient our lives to our true home—life in God. And we don’t have to wait for the here-after to do that. There are concrete, practical ways that we can live near God starting now. We can pray, at church and especially at home. If no words come, then silence will work, too. We can start looking for God in our everyday lives, expecting that God will show up, and then talk about it with our family and friends or write it down in a journal. We can read the Bible every morning or night. The purists in our midst can start with Genesis; but I also recommend starting with Mark’s gospel. Or if you’re feeling really crazy, try opening your Bible up to a random page. While I don’t recommend this method for making major financial decisions, who knows? The chances are that you’ll find something meaningful. And all of this is to say that there’s no magic here—there’s something much better. If we offer God an

inch God will take a mile. Like a houseguest that just won't leave, once we invite God in, God will stay awhile...and immediately start rearranging the furniture.

We should try these things not because we need more things to do but because these things help us focus on the journey we're meant to take, as opposed to the journey many of us are on—the quest for money, power, success or love, most of them good things in their own way. But we inevitably lose our way taking this second type of journey. If and when we reach the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, more often than not it ends up looking less like gold and more like Lucky Charms. As soon as we figure that out, we get back on the road again, looking for another, bigger pot of gold. But our intrepid psalmist would warn us away from looking for the next best thing. Do yourself a favor, she might say. Go home.

But home isn't where you're from, or even the place you'll return to after today after worship. Heaven is home, it's true, in an ultimate sense, but we don't have to die to get a sense of what it's all about. A physical place helps, but it isn't necessary. A pilgrimage can grease the gears, but it's also optional. Home is the place where you, and I, and God dwell together. If you've ever wondered why your internal GPS system gets better reception here, it happens to be not because this is a beautiful space, although it is; or because this is the only place we can find God, but because we're here together, and our signals are stronger together than apart. Inside each of us, and all of the faithful pilgrims before us, are the highways to Zion, the Map Quest directions to true happiness, and the promised bliss of life lived in deep relationship with God and with each other. Dear friends, welcome home. Amen.

ⁱ For more information about the Taizé community, go to <http://www.taize.fr/en>

ⁱⁱ *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary*, Roger E. Van Harn & Brent A. Strawn, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2009), 220.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.