



“Dwelling with God”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

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Psalm 84:1–7 (NRSV)***

I wonder, what’s on the top play list in your iPod? If you haven’t succumbed to the latest technology, I wonder what CD or cassette tape is in your player, or what radio station you listen to when you’re on the go?

When I was a kid—when most of us in this room were kids—there were no iPods, or CD players. Most of us probably didn’t have a tape deck in our vehicles. Some of us probably remember when vehicles came without radios, or we had parents or spouses that were too cheap to buy cars with radios in them. Now you can’t buy one without a music box. Back in the day, we made our own music when we went on road trips, right?

I remember singing silly songs on the school bus enroute to field trip destinations and sporting events. In high school, just to be goofy, we would sing children’s songs, like “The Wheels on the Bus,” and “John Jacob Jingleheimerschmidt;” then we graduated to “99 Bottles of Beer,” and the theme song from “Gilligan’s Island.” Singing these songs helped dull the monotony of long bus trips, and dialed down our anxieties as musicians, thespians, or athletes who were preparing for contests and sporting events.

I love music, and am grateful for the modern conventions that allow me to enjoy a wide array of musical selections throughout my day, especially while I travel from one place to another. My love for and spiritual practice of listening to music are reasons why I appreciate the fact that today’s scripture reading is from Israel’s hymnal, and in particular, from a musical genre that we might call “traveling music.”

Psalm 84 was a song sung by travelers enroute to the city of Jerusalem, perhaps for the fall harvest festival known as Sukkoth, which means “booths” or “huts.” Sukkoth is a Thanksgiving observance, in which our Jewish cousins commemorate the Hebrews’ 40 years of wandering in the wilderness after Sinai.

We recited some of the words from Psalm 84 in our call to worship this morning, and heard Rob read the first seven verses just a moment ago.

II

Perhaps you noticed how the narrative and images describe both the intensity of the travelers' desire to reach their destination, the Holy City of Jerusalem, and some of the geographic locations that these travelers had to pass through in order to get to the thanksgiving celebration.

One place on their faith journey that is especially referenced in the song was a place called the Valley of Bacá (Ba KAH). Listen again to some of the verses and hear how that reference stands out.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!
My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God.

. . .
Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise.
Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.
As they go through the valley of Bacá they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.
They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion . . .

This reference to the Valley of Bacá helps signal that we are hearing something more than an old “top ten” song on Ancient Israel’s radio dial. This song was traveling music for people enroute to Zion, who were going through a particular kind of experience. To better understand their experience, and the passage as a whole, we need to know more about the Valley of Bacá.

Scholars debate the physical location of this valley, but they do not dispute the meaning of it. Hebrew Bible scholar Patrick Miller explains in his footnotes in the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* that the Valley of Bacá was an “arid place,” a desert place.¹ I surmise it was a place like Death Valley.

The editors of *Harper’s Bible Dictionary* explain that Bacá may have been a place where trees with a particular kind of resin grew, and from which a healing balm was distilled from their leaves and bark. These trees exuded a moist resin that made them appear to be weeping.²

¹ Harper’s *NRSV*, p. 879.

² *Harpers’ Bible Dictionary*, p. 89.

Now that you know a little more about the Valley of Bacá, think again about the imagery and meaning in this verse:

As they go through the valley of Bacá they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

Imagine an arid place, a desert, a kind of Death Valley. Imagine a valley lined with trees like Balsam Poplars, or Australian Eucalyptus. Imagine a grove of Weeping Willows.

I've never been to Death Valley, California, but I suspect that many of you have. I've never been to the Middle East and seen the kinds of trees from which salves and balms are made. Maybe you haven't either. Regardless of how well-traveled we may or may not be, I suspect that all of us have spent some time in our own metaphorical death valleys, our own valleys of weeping.

III

This past week we got the word that a dear friend and former colleague of mine, who is only 52 years old, has been diagnosed with stage-four metastatic melanoma. Friday night, he and his wife flew into town from Seattle to see some plays at the Berkley Rep. I picked them up at the airport. They wanted to see our church. I showed them around, and then took them to dinner.

My friend told me that there is no known cure for the kind of cancer that he has, although in very rare cases it is contained, and survivors live quite a bit longer than most others with this diagnosis. My friend and I are hoping and praying that he is one in that number who survive longer with this kind of cancer. But we know that the statistics and the outlook are grim.

Three days ago, my friend started radiation and chemotherapy treatments, and he and we who know and love him began a different kind of journey together—a journey to Jerusalem, a journey which leads through Bacá, an arid place, a place of weeping. Despite how tragic and terrifying this journey feels for all who love him, he believes, and I do too, that this journey is not all about doom and gloom. At the end of his earthly journey, and all of our journeys there is an empty tomb, and a Great Thanksgiving feast awaiting us.

Along the way, as we move through the Valley of Bacá we will discover, if we haven't already, that the desert blooms even as the water of our tears hits the solid ground below us and coaxes hard seeds to burst and bloom, even though they have been dormant for many years.

Each of us, I suspect, in one way or another has been—or may currently be—on a journey to Jerusalem that wanders through the Valley of Bacá. Some of our journeys look like the kind of health challenges that my friend is experiencing. Others may literally

be about walking through desert valleys—or accompanying those who are on those journeys.

IV

The International Organization for Migration reports on their website that 214 million people today are on the road. They are on their own respective journeys through the proverbial Valley of Bacá. (214 million is a number of people equal to two-thirds of the US population.)

214 million are on the road, away from home, seeking refuge in a metaphorical kind of Jerusalem. 15 million people are political refugees, 27 million are internally displaced persons, and the vast majority, 182 million, are economic refugees and migrants.³ Our special guest next Sunday, Professor Buddy Martinez, will talk a little about the UCC's ministry with Burmese refugees who are encamped in Thailand, and with displaced people inside of Burma.

Migration is not only a huge concern in Thailand and Burma. It is also a huge concern on our continent. The signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 launched a significant rise in immigrants crossing the borders between the US, Mexico, and Canada, as workers from the south began moving north to fill jobs that had had moved north earlier as a result of this treaty.

Since 1994, the U.S. government has heightened controls on our southern borders, and substantially stepped up those controls after 9/11, when suspicions of terrorism became associated with undocumented persons crossing our national borders.

An increased number of migrants began taking more dangerous routes through the desert to cross over to the U.S. as a result of these stepped-up boarder control measures, and as a further result, an increasing number of men, women, and children have been found severely dehydrated or dead in the desert. In 2009 alone, 417 deaths were reported across our southern border,⁴ and sadly, these numbers only reflect the number of known deaths and grossly underestimate the actual number of migrants that have died attempting unauthorized border crossings.⁵

In response to these tragedies, an ecumenical community group in Sahuarita, Arizona, began meeting around the year 2000 to explore what would be their faith response to these policy changes and the deaths resulting from them. The group later named themselves the "Humane Borders Project." In the words of the UCC pastor in town, the Rev. Randy Mayer: "We wanted to take death out of the immigration equation."⁶

³ <http://www.iom.int/jahia/Jahia/about-migration/facts-and-figures/lang/en>

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Migrant_deaths_along_the_Mexico-U.S._border#cite_note-6

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⁶ <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/decjan09/across-the-ucc.html>

Humane Borders strove to accomplish their goal of taking death out of the immigration equation by setting up water stations in the desert. Their first was placed at Rio Rico, Arizona. By December of 2008 they had established and were maintaining over 90 water stations along the border. Some of their barrels distribute as much as 250 gallons of water a week during peak migration seasons.⁷

(For those who may not be aware, I'll point out that Church of the Good Shepherd is where our seminarian, Pedro Ramos-Goycolea, served as a staff member, and where the migrant congregation that he helped found was housed. Sahuarita is where he and Alejandra lived and served before he enrolled at Pacific School of Religion 18 months ago.)

Randy Mayer explained in the December 2008–January 2009 issue of our UCC national newspaper, *United Church News*, that obtaining permits for 90 water stations happened gradually, because the U.S. Border Patrol initially discouraged the idea, calling the availability of water “aiding and abetting.” He said, “There were lots of conversations with Border Patrol [in which the authorities argued] that more people would cross knowing there was water. But [those differences were ultimately settled when we came to an agreement that] . . . it is not illegal to put water in the desert.”⁸

Those conversations were pretty intense, Mayer conceded. “There [was and] is a push-pull factor [in all of this.] People are forced out of one economy, pulled into another, and nobody addresses the root causes. Migrants are caught in the middle . . . ”⁹

Mayer went on to explain, “All Americans benefit from the work of migrants, but we have no idea because the costs and benefits are hidden . . . We have blinders on, thinking we deserve all this; we want our food and vegetables cheap and our houses cleaned. Every single American lives a better life because of the migrant.”¹⁰ That’s how Randy Mayer describes the situation.

The psalmist puts it this way:

As they go through the valley of Bacá they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

Water stations in the borderlands, springs in the Valley of Bacá, people of faith offering a cup of lifesaving water—the God of gods is seen, even on the way to Zion. Can you behold it?

⁷ <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/decjan09/across-the-ucc.html>

⁸ <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/decjan09/across-the-ucc.html>

⁹ <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/decjan09/across-the-ucc.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.ucc.org/ucnews/decjan09/across-the-ucc.html>

Can you hear—especially if you, or someone you love is living with cancer; or if you are living in solidarity with migrants—can you hear that Psalm 84 isn't just any old song in the song book? It isn't just any old tune on the radio. It is a song about our journeys through life and death enroute to Jerusalem. It is traveling music for the trip through Bacá.

As we cross through these valleys, we and our traveling companions may find it hard to believe that we will ever reach that Great Thanksgiving in Zion, but even as we weep the desert blooms, and we discover that God's dwelling place is not just some distant destination, or formidable fortress.

No, God's dwelling place is with those on the journey, the journey through suffering. So the challenge isn't merely to get to Jerusalem, the challenge is to recognize and revel in the fact that one of the names and identities of the God of Israel is Shekhinah, "She who pitches her tent with us."¹¹ The signs are all around us. Do you see them?

V

I remember as a child being very sad one day about the death of a loved one, and noticing how everything in the natural environment seemed to reflect my grief. The rain was pouring down outside, the skies were gray, and the temperature was only slightly above freezing. I remember, too, thinking that the weather was a sign of God's sadness—that God was weeping with us that day.

My theology has evolved a bit as an adult. I'm not so sure that my literal interpretation of the weather was sound. But I am more sure now than ever that the God we worship is a God who weeps with us when we weep, and who migrates with us when we migrate.

Sometimes in our weeping, in our Death Valley experiences, we experience God's presence through our *compañeros* on the way. Sometimes we experience God's presence through the scenery on our path—like a grove of weeping willows. And sometimes, we experience God's presence through the music we sing, or the lyrics we hear as we listen and lean toward Jerusalem.

Whatever our situation may be, Psalm 84 provides us with a prayer practice that affirms this truth: God's dwelling place is not a destination. It's a tent in our death valleys, our valleys of weeping. Amen.

¹¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shekhinah>