

“I’d Rather Be...”

Psalm 84

We’ve all seen those license plate frames and bumper stickers declaring, “I’d rather be sailing,” or golfing, or jogging or fishing or skiing or flying and so forth. They make me wonder if anyone is ever where they want to be or doing what they want to do. We seem to have a bad case of “the rather-be’s.”

Despite all the “Rather-be...” bumper stickers out there, I’ve yet to see one that proclaims, “I’d rather be in Church” or “I’d Rather be Worshipping.” Yet if bumper stickers had been around when this morning’s Psalm was composed, its writer would surely have had such a one on his chariot. This morning the Psalmist exuberantly declares, “How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord...”

He builds on that thought throughout the Psalm, saying in verse four, “Happy are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise!” Then in verse ten he continues, “For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than to live in the tents of wickedness.” Two observations come to light here.

The first observation is this: we live in a “Rather-Be” age. There is nothing wrong with ruminating about paradise; someplace where we might find happiness and renewal. We do have a need and longing for a place of simplicity and goodness and straightforwardness. We long for a place in which all marriages are stable and happy; all children are wanted and secure; where there is no grinding poverty, nor ugly, ostentatious wealth; where no one is ever psychologically harmed, and differences in equalities between persons serve only to stimulate effort and aspiration, and never breed resentment. If imagining such “Edens”

moves us to action in righting wrongs here, and helps us to see what could be now, such ruminating is really positive. Too often though, our “Rather be” age leaves most in their day-dreams, sure that paradise is just somewhere else, with someone else, doing something else.

This leads us to the other observation to make this morning. Paradise is not found somewhere else; it is found in the presence of God. Where we might say, “I would rather be...(whatever)” our Psalmist declares, “...a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper, an usher, a greeter, in the house of my God...”

I was reminded of that truth a week ago when I got caught in a traffic shut-down on the Case/14th St. Bridge. While my mind was racing, wondering how I’d get to where I’d have rather been at that moment, namely, the airport, I noticed a car in front of me that had a bumper sticker with just the message I needed: “Bloom where you are Planted.”

Well, I certainly felt planted at that moment. But that message not only got me to my destination with a positive attitude, it also provided a good thought. No matter what season of life we might be in, no matter what type of work we might be doing, or where we might be planted, we can bloom. We can make a difference by investing that time in ways that bring deep personal blessing, and a bit of paradise to others.

In the history of the church, there have been those individuals who have caught this truth. One such individual was Saint Isidore. If you’ve never heard of St. Isidore, you’re not alone. He’s such an obscure saint that few have heard of him, but his story bears telling. He has come to be known as the patron saint of farmers. He was born to poor parents in Madrid, Spain, in 1070. The only legacy his parents could afford to leave him was a plow. Isidore hired on as a farm laborer for a wealthy land owner, who had an estate outside Madrid. No doubt Isidore would rather have been doing other things than the monotony of tracking a

plow endlessly back and forth across fields, especially for someone else. But Isidore began to walk with God in those fields; he learned the discipline of combining work and prayer. Each day as he turned the earth with his plow, he turned to God in his thoughts.

That changed him. The first difference was that he stopped just wishing to be elsewhere. As he walked the fields in conversation with God a relationship grew and deepened. His work began to be noted. He worked with greater care than the other hired hands, because he now saw his labor as a partnership with God; God would feed his people through Isidore's efforts. As he walked the fields, his life was being transformed from the inside out.

A second difference was a steady growing change in his whole demeanor with others as well. His resentfulness toward his poverty disappeared. He became an encourager and helper among the other workers, taking up extra work to cover if any got sick, and giving the earnings to the sick one's family until that one could return. While he labored, paradise was growing in him and around him. Though he may well have desired to be physically elsewhere, inside he was becoming where he longed to be, where God was increasingly present. That presence in his life became obvious to his fellow laborers, and even the land owner. They all eventually sought him out for the secrets of his happiness. Dedicating himself to God each morning, speaking with God in conversation throughout the day, opened him to God's presence growing within him, and opened him to helping others gain a bit of paradise too. Worshiping God each moment gave him life for every moment.

We all dream of paradises. But we have started to arrive there when those dreams become visions that drive us to work for a better world here and now. And we do arrive there when "there" becomes "here"; a life given to walking with God, where our beings commune with the

very being of God, where, with the Psalmist, we experience the joys of shared worship, where the "tabernacles" of God give rest, his "courts" grant comfort, his "altars" renew us, and "the Lord's House" offers fellowship with God and God's people.

Happy are we when we can catch the Psalmist's enthusiasm for worship; marked by anticipation, longing, and thirst for God and for his house. Those who do, find restoring grace, and a reconnection with life. They find friendship with God. That really is paradise. Examine your "Rather-Be's," those places of imagined joy and peace of mind. Are they really paradise? The ultimate paradise is lived in the service and presence of the living God. Let your heart and soul and mind "Rather-Be" with him!