

“Passionate Wanderers”

Psalm 139.1–12

The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong’l UCC, 7 October 2007

I am departing from the lectionary – the cycle of appointed scriptural texts – this morning primarily because today is World Communion Sunday, a day when Christians around the globe celebrate one of the two central sacraments of our faith in solidarity with one another. In our tradition, it is often a day to express our unity with others and also to appreciate what other cultures bring into the Christian family.

I have chosen the beginning Psalm 139 because of its connection to the Celtic saints, and because three weeks ago, I found myself sitting alone, reciting this particular psalm in the ruins of St. Kevin’s cell, the 1,500-year-old site overlooking a gorgeous lake. St. Kevin began his ministry as a hermit, living a life of meditation in a remote valley in the Wicklow mountains. Soon, though, he was joined by others seeking intimacy with God.

One of the deep hungers of the human heart is to be known deeply and to be loved. And it is this intimacy that is conveyed so beautifully by the psalmist: “You have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. . . . You . . . lay your hand upon me.”

Going even further back than the life of St. Kevin into the history of our faith, we see that solitude is one of the ways we encounter God most deeply. Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days of spiritual discovery, which marks the beginning of his ministry and which we mark as the season of Lent. And in the Jewish monastic tradition, the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls – the Essenes – fled everyday lives to go into the cliffs of Qumran to live lives of solitude and devotion.

The earliest Christian monastics were the desert fathers and mothers – women and men who sought prayerful solitude and enlightenment in the deserts of Egypt. One of the sayings we have from them is “Go and sit I your cell, and your cell will teach you everything.” (It sounds like a Zen *koan* from the Buddhist tradition!) There is a paradox about monastic solitude, which is being *alone . . . together*. The desert fathers and mothers went to lead a solitary life, and others were drawn by what they saw of these early monastics, who centered themselves solely on the life of the spirit. (*Monos* or *one* is the root of the word *monastic*.) Though they lived a solitary existence, studying the scriptures and praying in their cells, they came together for a meal and to worship.

Most of the world’s great religions have some sort of monastic tradition, and Celtic Christianity is no exception. Of course there are no deserts in Ireland (anything but!) so the early Irish monastics went into their own indigenous wilderness to find solitude and relationship with God. And like the desert mothers and fathers after whom they modeled themselves, they started as solitary figures and were joined by others with a similar desire for intimacy with the holy, eventually founding monasteries, which would become the first major centers of learning in Ireland, attracting students from across Europe. In Irish Gaelic, the word they chose for monastic sites is *Diseart* (*pron. DEE-shurt*) . . . the cognate of desert . . . and these “deserts” were often founded on remote, rocky islands or in secluded mountain valleys, away from civilization.

The earliest Irish monastic was St. Enda, a fifth-century cleric who started a community on Inish Mór in the Aran Islands – at the very edge of the known world. Though he began as a hermit, Enda was by nature a wonderful teacher and before long, the island monastery became a center for learning. Two of Enda’s students, St. Columba (or Columcille) and St. Brendan were among the most revered Irish saints.

In the generation before Enda's monastic foundation, another "passionate wanderer" came to Ireland in the person of St. Patrick. One of the amazing things about Patrick, who lived from 387 to 461, is that we have his autobiography. Patrick was born on the western coast of Britain, and was captured as a youth by Irish raiders and sold into slavery in Ireland. He eventually escaped, returned to Britain, and studied as a priest and had a vision of returning to Ireland to bring Christianity to the people with whom he had lived in bondage. Unlike his predecessors who had tried to introduce Christianity into Ireland, Patrick met with a high degree of success, in large part by working with the Irish nobility. And the conversion of the Irish happened nonviolently, without spilling a drop of blood on either side – Druid or Christian.

St. Columcille was of royal blood of the prominent Northern Uí Néill family, and before the age of 20, he was ordained as a deacon and later a priest. Though he established large monasteries like Durrow in Ireland, he is best known as the founder and abbot of Iona off the west coast of Scotland. It was from the base of Iona that Columcille introduced Christianity to the Picts of Scotland. (The Roman mission never made it north of Hadrian's Wall.)

It should be mentioned that Ireland was on the western edge of the known world and though they traded with Rome, the Irish were never part of the Empire, which was in serious decline as the golden age of monastic Christianity flourished in Ireland.

Legend has it that Columcille set out from the north of Ireland in a coracle – a tiny wood-framed leather boat – and would accept as a mission anywhere he landed, and it just happened to be the strategic island of Iona. Though it likely didn't happen quite that way, I can imagine Columcille holding fast to a verse from Psalm 139: "If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limit of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me." Columcille's mission to the Picts was a success, and he is revered both by the Irish and the Scots. One historian notes that "Columcille sailed to Scotland as a 'pilgrim for Christ.' He did not select his destination at random, however: as a successful warrior-prince, politician, and abbot, Columcille was probably invited by Conall the new king of Argyll."¹ So, it's likely that Columcille set out with a company of fellow monks with the intention of establishing an abbey on Iona. (Interestingly, it was in the 1930s, that a Church of Scotland minister, George MacLeod, gathered some unemployed workers from Glasgow and some clergy to rebuild the abbey on Iona, founding the modern Iona Community, which is the most vital expression of Celtic Christianity in the world today. John Bell of the Iona Community will be with us in January to do workshops on Celtic Christianity and Music, as well as lead worship.)

The third "passionate wanderer" I'd like to introduce you to is Saint Brendan the Navigator, another pupil of St. Enda. Like Columcille, he established monasteries in Ireland, and he also is surrounded by legend. He is said to have set out from southwestern Ireland, where he was born, to seek the new lands, eventually coming to Iceland and North America. He was said to have done this in a *curragh*, a wooden-framed, oxhide boat. And before we totally write off the idea that this was possible, the voyage was re-enacted in 1976 by sailor Tim Severin in a replica of Brendan's *curragh*, who sailed north to the Hebrides, the Faroe Islands, and Iceland, and then followed the currents westward toward Greenland and then finally to Newfoundland.



¹ Elizabeth Rees, *Celtic Saints: Passionate Wanderers*. (NY: Thames and Hudson, 2000), p. 105.

While this all may be interesting to the historically minded, what does it have to do with the spiritual lives of people living a millennium and a half later?

In some sense, I hope that we all are “passionate wanderers,” people who sense the call of the holy, the call of Christ, leading us into new directions in our lives. That perhaps we are called to go down “the road less traveled” and explore the inner realm of the spirit, as well as the world around us. Carl Jung once wrote “Who looks *outside* dreams; who looks *inside* awakens.” The journey leads us in and outward.

One way to think about our lives is as a pilgrimage, a journey of faith. It is not that we start at point A and move to point B and wind up at a specified destination. Rather, if we listen to the whispers and rumblings of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we can get a sense of direction that might lead us on new courses. As it did for Columcille and Brendan, embarking on a new course requires courage. And I pray that we have the courage to open our hearts and minds to new ways of being in closer relationship with God.

Knowing that God surrounds us is reinforced in the psalm: “You hem me in, behind me and before me, and you lay your hand on me.” This also is echoed in many Celtic Christian prayers for protection during the journey, most notably in the Lorica (or breastplate) of St. Patrick: “Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left.” If we have confidence that we are encircled by the love of Christ, we can have the courage to take risks and go forth on the journeys to which we are called.

We could stay right where we are...comfortable...at home...at our jobs...in school...at church...or we could push ourselves to move beyond our comfort zones. We could stretch to be full the selves God is calling us to be. Iraneaus, a second-century father of the early church, said that “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.” And I would challenge us to listen for the invitation of God to embark more fully on the pilgrimage of our lives.

During the Ireland pilgrimage I went on, one of the leaders, Dom Crossan, posed a question for us: “What is the difference between a pilgrimage and a tour with prayer?” He let us explore that question during the time of our travels together, and later commented that on a pilgrimage, one expects an encounter with the holy. I would add that one begins a pilgrimage with the *intention* of such an experience, and as the journey continues, one directs one’s *attention* toward an encounter with God.

My hope is that your life is a pilgrimage. That it is marked by expectation of an encounter with God, who is within you, all around you, and far beyond you. And that you will bring your *intention* and your *attention* to bear as you travel the pilgrim way.

To close, let me share with you a blessing of solitude, from a contemporary Irish theologian and poet, John O’Donohue:

“May you recognize in your life the presence, power, and light of your soul.

May you realize that you are never alone,

that your soul in its brightness and belonging connects you intimately with the rhythm of the universe.

May you have respect for your own individuality and difference.

May you realize that the shape of your soul is unique, that you have a special destiny here, that behind the façade of your life there is something beautiful, good, and eternal

happening.

May you learn to see yourself with the same delight, pride, and expectation with which God sees you in every moment.²” Amen.

² John O’Donohue, *Anam Cara*. (NY: HarperCollins, 1997), p. 125.